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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

May 9, 2024

Ascension Day, All Years, Revised Common Lectionary

[Acts 1:1-11](#)

[Psalm 47](#) or [Psalm 93](#)

[Ephesians 1:15-23](#)

[Luke 24:44-53](#)

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I remember being very small, maybe three or four years old, and walking up to my parents and hugging them around the legs. I wonder if you have a memory like that too of being small and looking up at a grownup you loved and how they towered over you, twice your height or more, like a mighty tree.

We are awed by things that are up high. And no wonder. Cognitive scientists have pointed out all the ways that from birth onwards we learn to associate good things with the idea of UP. Pour milk into a cup and the more you have, the higher it gets. Have your parent pick you up high and you can see much farther. As adults the idea of “up” is baked into the ways we think and talk. We talk about the stock market going “up” or our mood feeling “up” or our favorite team being “up” by six points. Our language of prayer and worship is like this too. At the altar the priest invites the people to “Lift up your hearts,” and we all know we are not literally raising up our hearts in the air, yet we know we are talking about something more than literal, a way of placing ourselves in will and intention in God’s presence.

The passages from Luke's gospel and the book of Acts we heard today tell us that when Jesus was ready to move forward into the next stage of God's unfolding mission, to say farewell to his disciples in one sense so he could be with them in another, he led them out to a mountain—just as God's people have met God on mountains throughout time, Moses and Elijah on Mount Sinai, Jesus before on the Mount of the Transfiguration, and so on—and he ascended into heaven.

Now we might say, “How old-fashioned! How crude! We all know God is not literally up in space! How are we supposed to believe in the Ascension of Jesus in a world where probes go to other planets and rich people can pay to go up in space as tourists?” But we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously and we shouldn't write off the power of “up” too quickly. The writer C.S. Lewis back in the mid-20th century pointed out that if Jesus was going to take his leave from his disciples in a suitable fashion, why shouldn't have they seen him go upward? What were the other options, going down or sideways? Somehow seeing Jesus disappear into the ground like a trapdoor or a downward elevator wouldn't have been quite as impressive.

In any case we get slightly different impressions of the Ascension elsewhere in the New Testament. In John's gospel Jesus says after the resurrection that he is ascending to the Father but there's no description of any actual Ascension event; the book ends with a resurrection appearance by the Sea of Galilee. In his letters St. Paul writes that Jesus appeared to the disciples for a period of time after the resurrection and then last of all to Paul himself before the appearances ceased. As with so much else in scripture, the point isn't to try to harmonize these different versions in detail but to appreciate each one individually and also to take note of what they all have in common.

After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples in powerful, visible, tangible ways for a certain period of time. Luke calls it forty days, a traditional Biblical number, like the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness or the forty days it rained in Noah's flood, which might give us a clue that this isn't about chronological precision so much as God's time. But while it lasted, the disciples rejoiced. They knew he was alive again. They knew God had triumphed.

But Jesus wasn't raised from the dead just to hang out. There was more to God's mission than a happy ending with Jesus restored to his friends. The resurrection wasn't an ending at all, it was a beginning. The message of God's love, God's grace, God's victory over death, had to spread beyond a single place and time. Jesus's presence had to spread beyond a single place and time. So it was time for him to be absent from his friends in one way so he could be present not only with them but with the whole world in another. The letter to the Ephesians says Jesus ascended into heaven "so that he might fill all things." Soon after, he would send them the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and they would become his messengers, his ambassadors, but more than that: the extension of his physical presence in the world as his Body, the Church.

Here at Incarnation we have a banner that has hung in Farlander Hall for a number of years that says "Christ has no body but ours." And I will tell you a little secret. That quote actually isn't my favorite. It's a line from a longer saying that's often quoted and requoted and even set to music and is attributed to St. Teresa of Avila, but she never said anything like it, and as a Catholic Christian she wouldn't have.

She would have believed in the traditional teaching that Christ has a threefold body: as his human body, he died and rose and ascended; as his ecclesial body, he is present in every member of the church; and as his eucharistic body he is present whenever we share in the holy meal of Communion. The quote seems to have actually come from a Quaker speaker in the late 1800s.¹ Which makes sense, because the Quaker tradition, with all its beauty and integrity, is a nonsacramental tradition that doesn't practice Holy Communion, and so from a Quaker point of view there really is no other Body of Christ than Jesus's followers.

So I'd rather phrase it not negatively but positively; not "Christ has no body but ours," as if he lacked something unless we do it for him; but yes, "Christ's body is indeed in us, as well as in heaven, as well as on the altar!" But with that, the whole rest of the poem is absolutely true: "Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassionately on the world; yours are the feet with which he walks to do good." We don't need to take away from the many ways that Christ's Body is present to assert with absolute confidence that he is present in us.

In just over a week we will celebrate Pentecost, the moment when that Body is animated by the living gift of the Spirit that propels us outward to share God's love with a world that longs to hear it. He has gone *up* so that he might be with us always—and might send us *out*.

¹ Sarah Elizabeth Rowntree, drawing partly on Methodist minister Mark Guy Pearse. "Whose Hands? Another Possible Case of Cumulative Authorship," *Mockingbird's Imitations: Blogger Edition* (November 7, 2011), <https://mimuspolyglottos.blogspot.com/2011/11/whose-hands-another-possible-case-of.html>.