

Ascension
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Mark the Evangelist

Acts 1:1 - 11

Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15 - 23

Luke 24:44-53

Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia!

One of the traps for preachers is the temptation to approach the text or the theme for the day as a problem. But difficult texts and themes do exist. Among them the Ascension is recognised as “endlessly problematic” - incapable of a single, easy explanation [B. Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching*, Year B, 1993 p 327, to whom I owe numerous ideas in this sermon.] The Gospels keep a close link in time between the Cross, the Resurrection and the Ascension, but in the fourth century the forty-day delay mentioned in Acts led to Ascension being celebrated separately, in the lead up to Pentecost.

Despite the difficulties the question is, what does Ascension mean? “*Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia*”. Ascension proclaims a fundamental element in New Testament preaching: after the resurrection Jesus was “exalted”: “lifted up, to the right hand of God”. The resurrection is a demonstration that the power authority and life of God was at work in Jesus. And the Ascension affirms that God has embraced him fully, and “lifted him up” to share all of God’s dominion, authority and life-giving power.

That’s it! That’s what Ascension means. This is not about Jesus being an early version of Dr Who, or the first ever Astronaut. The virtually unutterable truth of the Ascension is that Jesus shares everything with God, and God shares everything with Jesus. Because of him we are given a share in the divine life of God. This idea tests the boundaries of language, but it is what Ephesians is referring to when it says: “[God] seated him as his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but in the age to come. He has put all things under his feet and made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, [Eph 1:20-23]. Every word points to the fullest possible unity of Jesus with God. And although this comes from the end of the story, the truth proclaimed is no different from what is proclaimed at Christmas when John 1:1 – 14 is read.

[God] seated him as his right hand in the heavenly places: In order to express the truth of these words the New Testament writers borrowed heavily from the Psalms, particularly the language of praise at the enthronement of a king. This language is not explanatory. It praises God for a change of status, but it was never meant to explain how this happened, or to be spatially specific, other than to say, where God is, there is Jesus. This language operates in the realm of wonder, amazement and gratitude for what God has done in giving us Jesus and gathering Jesus to himself.

Worship is the arena where these sentiments are given voice. There lyrical and glad witness is offered in praise of what God has done to reveal where the real source of life and governance of the world lies. A good example of this is the Gloria/Doxology that we sing most weeks as part of the service. The text has its problems, just as the Scripture texts for today are in some ways odd and troubling. They are unconventional and unpredictable because their aim is to allow us to catch a glimpse of something that is actually out of reach. We fail completely if we concretise these narratives and songs and turn them into literal truth. They are words of praise and witness. They seek to tell us something truthful about God. They proclaim and celebrate that since one of us has been gathered into God, we have been given a share in God, and that changes everything.

What is the take home message of Ascension? That God “lifted up” Jesus does not cancel out the cross or the resurrection. Rather, in language that echoes the language of cross, and the raising of Jesus, it discloses their inner meaning: the very life of God is given for us. That Jesus has been “lifted up to share all things with God” does not eliminate the tragedy of the cross or, in some way balance the books of life. On the contrary, the New Testament is quite clear: Christian hope grows most strongly on the soil of spiritual catastrophe. It flourishes in the absence of the presence of the one we love.

That God “lifted up” Jesus means much more than that he becomes significant for the people of Israel. It means he has universal authority: he is significant for the whole world. Jesus is far more than a prophet who appeared in Galilee. He expressed the hidden meaning of God’s rule over all things. That God “lifted up” Jesus does not signal the conclusion of a sequence of resurrection appearances so much as the beginning of the Church’s first movement into a worldwide mission in the power of the descending Spirit. A point that is made in the Icon Notes for today. The Spirit connects us to Jesus, illuminates our understanding of him, and enables us to participate in the ongoing, transforming work the mission of God seeks to accomplish through him.

When God “lifted up” Jesus, one of us was exalted and glorified. This is a proclamation of good news for us all. That Jesus is where God is means that *we are the language God uses to speak to us* [Hans Urs von Balthasar: *the Way of Revelation*]. What we learn from the Word made flesh is that God intends to renew and perfect human nature, and through Christ has shown us the first fruits of what that means. This is affirming for all who are “in Christ” because it offers us hope that despite the disappointments and disruptions we suffer life will ultimately have a positive outcome. And it provides the motivation and basis for mission for all who are moved to work for the renewal and restoration of the created world and the life of the human community.

Through the conflicting nature of the historical narratives and the uncertainties of its imagery Ascension marks a moment of separation between Jesus Christ and us. But that separation also points to the universalising of his significance for our lives, and for all life in the world. The other side of the proclamation that one of us shares everything with God is that it opens up the present possibility of us sharing his loving union with God. That means even we may come to share the wonder of restored communion between the life of God, and the life of the world. Hail the day that sees him rise. Alleluia!
