

Sermon on Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53
The Ascension of Our Lord, May 8, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

For any of you who may have missed the Feast of the Ascension this past Thursday (the real date for the Feast, 40 days after Easter), or my sermon last year on this day, I will begin this sermon with the question everyone always asks: *So, where is Jesus?* Sometimes we are told by the Church that Jesus is in our hearts – thinkable only by faith. Sometimes we are told that Jesus is present wherever two or more are gathered in his name (which means that we must also imagine Jesus to be in a whole lot of places all at once – but Jesus is God, after all)! We are also taught that Jesus body is in the bread and Jesus blood is in the wine of the holy eucharist, through the mystery of faith, which cannot be explained satisfactorily or comprehended. Today we are told by Luke in his gospel and in the book of Acts that Jesus is ascended into heaven, as witnessed by his disciples, and there he rules at the right hand of God, until the last day, when he shall come again to judge the living and the dead. *So where is Jesus, really?* I'm not surprised that you ask, or are still confused. I am, too – and I cannot give you a definitive answer. But that doesn't mean that I can't preach a sermon on this question! Because I can!

One thing that is good in that “Jesus is not here on earth” – either walking around or buried in the ground, is that people are not going around searching for our risen Lord, doing documentaries for public television or the History Channel. That would be too much! No, we don't want that, even though we think it would be nice to have Jesus hanging out with us today, in the flesh. It is even better that there is no “grave of the crucified Jesus”, for people to visit on pilgrimage (it's bad enough that people give tours to the tomb where some think Jesus was buried – for a price – even when no one really knows! And thank God we don't have a shrine like Graceland, where Elvis Presley fans go to visit the dead King of Rock and Roll. No, it is far better that Jesus ascended into heaven, and by all the evidence is with God in heaven, available to us through prayer, and also present with us in spirit and truth when we gather in his name, or share holy communion.

One of the most literal representations of the ascension of Jesus is re-enacted in the St. Nikolaskirche in Juterborg, Germany. Every Ascension Day for centuries a statue of Christ, the *himmelfahrt* figure, is raised up by a rope on pulleys, while the organ plays single notes in a slow, ascending scale. Above the balcony, above the ranks of organ pipes, and (wait for it!) through a hole in the high, curved ceiling it disappears, and heaven's door closes behind Jesus. When I think about what it would be like to do this here, I wonder “what could go wrong?” – and my dreams turn into nightmares. Don't worry, we're not going to do it! We will leave

the technological nightmare to more “high tech” mega churches, which have the digital powers and theatrical acumen to pull this off. We will stick to telling the story with words, hymns, and our prayers rising up to God in heaven like incense!

Artists through the ages have attempted to portray on canvas, stained glass and in music, their interpretations of the ascension of our Lord. Many of these works of art are quite famous, done in classic style – from Byzantine to Renaissance, to Romantic and Contemporary, often with Jesus surrounded by winged angels receiving him into the clouds. One of my favorites is that strange work you see on the cover of your service sheet. Take a closer look. It is the *Ascension of Christ* by the 20th century Spanish artist Salvador Dali, painted in 1958, which combines Catholic mysticism with nuclear physics! He painted it after having a dream, with several visions of Christ. This piece was inspired by the nucleus of the atom – which you can see in the center circle, which looks like a sunflower. This atom overlaps the divine sphere of the Holy Spirit, symbolized by a dove with outstretched wings. Jesus rises toward an energized, electrified heaven, his fingers curled by electric power. But the soles of Jesus’ feet are soiled from walking among us on earth, and are the last thing the disciples would have seen. The face at the top of the painting is a portrait of Dali’s wife and muse, named Gala – who often represented the Virgin Mary in his art. She is weeping as she watches her son leaving the earth. Never mind that the Assumption of Mary into heaven didn’t happen until years *after* Jesus’ ascension – this is all symbolic, of course! And it was, after all, Salvador Dali’s dream. Strange, yet fascinating!

All works of art – and perhaps, even Luke’s words in the gospel – are just symbolic representations of how Jesus the human being left the earth to be joined with the Father. It had to be done, lest human beings continually search for him in cities and towns, in jungles or desert wildernesses. Like all art, it’s a visual rendition of a theological concept – that Jesus the human being becomes divine, who doesn’t walk the earth in the flesh like a human any longer, because we believe that he is equally divine. Because we human beings are “stuck” on earth, anchored to the ground until the recent advent of airplanes and space travel, seeing our Lord ascend, or “float” into heaven, as something only God, or angels, can do. This is a strange, mysterious concept – only spoken of twice in scripture, both by the same author, Luke – at the end of the gospel, and at the beginning of Acts. In the Old Testament we read how Elijah was taken up in a chariot of fire into heaven by a whirlwind, which is equally strange. It’s all beyond our human experience, just like the Resurrection of Jesus, which also is a subject for all kinds of art.

So what is the point of all this? Is it to add to the speculation of where Jesus is, and how he got there? I think not! Maybe the many works of art depicting the Ascension only serve to distract us from the point Jesus made to his disciples, and to us. In the gospel read today from Luke, Jesus told his disciples that repentance

and forgiveness of sins were to be proclaimed in his name to all nations. But first, wait in Jerusalem until they would receive power from on high – from the Holy Spirit. Then he led them out to Bethany, blessed them, and withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. The disciples joyfully returned to Jerusalem, to pray and to wait for this power, as he promised would come.

In the beginning of the book of Acts, Luke tells the story again, to make sure we get the point. He told his disciples again that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit, and they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Amazingly, as Jesus was saying this, he was lifted up into the clouds, out of sight. As they were looking, two men in white robes stood by them (by their dress, we assume they are angel messengers). “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” So they returned to Jerusalem to wait, as Jesus had told them. We will take up the story again next Sunday, which is the Feast of Pentecost, when that power of the Holy Spirit did come, filling them with the ability to speak the words of the gospel in the languages of many nations.

But even as they praised God for Jesus’ ascension and held onto their thoughts of heaven, the work of the apostles took place on the ground, just as Jesus’ work did. Recall those feet of Jesus soiled with dirt, from walking on earth – the disciples’ last glimpse of him in the Ascension! We follow a Lord who walked as he talked with his disciples, about the way that leads to life. His feet carried him to towns and villages that were off the usual path, where he sat at tables to eat with outcasts and sinners, as well as with Pharisees, to sit with children and hold them in his arms, to heal the sick and feed the hungry, and then to the steps of the Temple where he challenged the disparities between the wealthy and the poor.

The Ascension reminds us of our mission as well. We aren’t made to spend our time gazing into heaven, contemplating what the future up there might be like for us. The angel messengers remind us that our place is here, where God has sent us, to wait for the power of the Spirit, and then to take our witness to God’s goodness and mercy in our lives to others. Walking with others like Jesus did will also leave our feet dirty, and maybe even tired and sore! Perhaps if someone were to paint a picture of our calling as Christians, it might be a little bit like the Salvador Dali painting, with our attention focused on God’s Word in Christ Jesus, and our feet soiled and dirty as we walk with one another – or those places where we wouldn’t go, except out of faith.

So we remember today how God is not limited by time or space, just as Jesus is not bound by heaven or by earth. With Jesus walking beside us, going before us and encouraging us from behind, perhaps you and I will dare to go out into this world where the Holy Spirit leads us. For in our baptism we have also

received this power “from on high”, which can work within us and inspire us to walk with one another with love, to share the love of Christ with the world.