

Ephesians 1:15-23

Ascension Sunday

May 10, 2024

Is Jesus' Ascension best understood as a graduation exercise, or as a bolt of lightning?

As I wrote in my Minister's Message, I used to understand Ascension Sunday as Jesus getting out of our way after his post-resurrection victory lap, so that we can get on with the business of being the mature Church: it was Jesus handing us the keys to the kingdom and saying, "over to you."

That does seem to be implied in the angels' comments to the apostles: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." The implication is that this is not the time to be watching the clouds: it is time to focus on the work before us, to put our noses to the grindstone.

Days and years later, the Church seems to have taken this to heart. Writing to the church in Ephesus, the writer gives thanks to God for their faith in Jesus and for their love toward all the saints. The Church has put Jesus' teachings into practice, and takes seriously his commandment to love each other as he has loved us.

This seems like the church of a Jesus who has done what is necessary for us, and then gotten out of the way. This is Jesus as Teacher of Wisdom, in whom we have faith and whose lessons we live by. This is Jesus as Sacrifice, in whose death we are freed and transformed. This is the church as graduate, as self-sufficient adult ready to face our challenges.

Jesus is indeed Teacher and Sacrifice. But Jesus is also more than these things. I wonder if the church of Jesus as teacher and sacrifice is sufficient.

This is God's world, and the Church is called to live in it, to point, like the Ephesian church, to Jesus. We are called to live by his teachings. But like the Ephesian church, we live in a world that does not always live in harmony with God's dream for it. What do we do when teachings are not enough? We are cleansed from sin, made new in Christ, but if that was a one-time thing, how do we live in a world that still has sin, where death and the fear of death is present? How do we live as citizens of the kingdom of God when the kingdom is not yet here?

The danger is that, living in the world, we become of the world: that we put our ultimate trust in laws and science and market forces. We strategize and plan but we do so within the constraints and assumptions of those who make the laws and rule the market. They determine what is possible, and even what is desirable, without reference to the God who makes all things new.

And that is why the Ascension is important. The incarnation – God made known in Jesus, born in a Bethlehem stable – shows us God in a human being. But the Ascension shows us the possibility of human life lived fully in God.

How so?

The account of Jesus' Ascension seems to emphasize the parallels with Aaron's work as the High Priest during the Exodus, and the rituals of the Day of Atonement ever since.¹ The sacrifice for the people's sin is killed on the altar outside the Temple, and then the priest enters the holiest part of the Temple, accompanied by billowing clouds of incense. There he offers the sacrifice before God, interceding for the people. He then reemerges from the Temple in the same way, through the clouds of incense, to pronounce God's blessing on the people.

Just as Aaron raises his hands in blessing, so also does the departing Jesus. Just as Aaron enters into God's presence to present the sacrifice and intercede with God for the people, so also does Jesus ascend into Heaven, through the clouds, into God's presence to unite God with the people. This is why the men in white – the angels – chastise the apostles for staring after Jesus in apparent awe and confusion. Their message is not simply “stop daydreaming and get to work,” but also, “You're Jews; you know how this

¹ Matthew Burden, “Why Christ's Ascension is Essential,” *Christianity Today*, May 25, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/may-web-only/christ-ascension-day-heaven-atonement-gospel-redemption.html>.

works. Jesus will be back, bearing the assurance of God's blessing, just like the High Priest returns to bless the people."

This is why any understanding of Jesus' work that ends at the crucifixion or even the resurrection is incomplete. If Jesus were only the sacrifice, only a payment for sin as in a medieval legal transaction, then the sacrifice would be sufficient. But the deliberate parallel of the Ascension with Jewish ritual practices reminds us that the presentation before God and the communion with God is also important. Jesus is more than teacher; Jesus is more than sacrifice; Jesus is also high priest, the one who ascends into God's presence and brings God near to us. That's why the Ascension is more like a lightning bolt than a graduation exercise. When a difference in electric charge develops between a cloud and the ground, a channel is formed toward the ground. But a lightning strike does not occur unless charged particles from the ground rise to meet it. Then a connection is formed, and BOOM.

Jesus Christ is both the divine descending to the human, and the human ascending to the divine. The connection of the two – the flash of lightning – is the power that makes everything possible. The writer of Ephesians encourages the Church to look for more than faith in Jesus and care for the saints. He prays that the Spirit may descend so that they may know the hope of their calling, the riches of their inheritance, and the greatness of his power. The presence, the potential, the power of God is not a memory or

a teaching: it is a present reality. The Church is the body of Christ. This does not simply mean that we are his proxy, put to work in his absence, but that he becomes us and we become him, and are united to God.

In this way, Christology – the work of Christ – is identical to Ecclesiology: the work of the Church.² Although the language of Ascension may suggest a two-story universe, one in which God lives upstairs and we live downstairs, it instead affirms that the Christ in whom we dwell is also in constant communion with God. We are united with God: only God is our ultimate meaning, not laws, or markets, not anything in the push and pull of our daily life. We come from God; we are going to God; and anything is possible. Thanks be to God.

² Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 125.