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“A Blessing”

Luke 24:44-53

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In Luke, Jesus appears to the disciples after the Easter morning resurrection. He appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He appears to his disciples, gathered all together, shows them his wounds and then shares a meal with them. He teaches them a bit, and then Luke skips forward to the scene of Jesus’ ascension. That is where we come to our text for today.

Luke 24:44-53. ⁴⁴ Then [Jesus] said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’

⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Anyone else’s child ever ask deep and difficult questions while riding in the car? On Wednesday evening, driving Eleanor home after the Finance Committee meeting, she was telling me about her day. But as we turned onto 13th Street and drove across Memorial Bridge, with a



beautiful view of the clouds dotting around McAfee Knob in the distance, Eleanor sweetly asked, out of the blue, “Did anyone else get up to heaven like Jesus on the cloud?”

I had to ask her to repeat the question.

“Did anyone else ever go up to heaven on a cloud? Is that what happens when we die? We go up to heaven on a cloud?”

Now, to be completely honest with you, I don’t remember reading the story of the ascension to her, so this casual car ride question must be thanks to her Sunday school teachers, CWW storytellers, or Second Pres. Preschool. Regardless, I was a little impressed by the question, deftly wedged between enthusiastic stories about science club and soccer shots. And I had to think for a moment before I could respond. Eleanor loves the story of Elijah, thanks to the song, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and we remembered together that Elijah was carried to heaven on a chariot of fire. But, “No,” that didn’t count, we decided. So, we came to the conclusion together that, yes, Jesus was the only one lifted up to heaven in a cloud.

“So then is heaven *in* the clouds?” she asked.

“No, not exactly. We don’t know exactly where heaven is, but we know it’s with God,” I replied.

“Then did Jesus go up and up and up into the sky and into outer space?”

No, that’s not quite right either. I admitted I have a lot of questions myself, but that maybe the Bible isn’t trying to tell us exactly physically or spatially *where* Jesus is, but that he’s with God. That whatever heaven means, it’s with God.

Then, to my great relief, the question pivoted to whether or not we might have any watermelon popsicles left at home.

Today marks six weeks after Easter. Next Sunday is Pentecost. Between these two liturgical milestones—when our paraments move from white to red—we celebrate the ascension of Jesus. His ascension makes way, even sets the scene, for the arrival of the Spirit to his believers gathered in Jerusalem.

Our text from Luke tries to explain what that looked like. How Jesus went from a physical resurrected body walking and talking with them, to then “seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,” as we recite in the creed week after week.



It's not difficult for us to imagine those early disciples, trying to make sense of the ascension, asking the question, much like Eleanor did—so, where is Jesus now?

We, too, tend to want to answer that question spatially.

So, think about it with me. Christians confess that Jesus “came down” to earth in the incarnation—when God took on human form at Jesus’ birth. After Jesus’ crucifixion and before his resurrection, we confess in the Apostles’ Creed (and in scripture (I Peter 3)) that Jesus went “down” even further when he “descended into hell.” And now, we read how Jesus “goes up” on a cloud (perhaps?) to heaven in the ascension. Finally, after Jesus “goes up” this week in the ascension, we celebrate that the Holy Spirit “came down” upon the believers at Pentecost. That’s a great deal of motion—down, down lower, and up again, then down one more time.

Dan Clendenin asks whether passages like ours require us to consider these ancient words of Scripture in ways that honor modern scientific cosmologies. How should we understand this language of ascent and descent? Is it metaphorical or literal? Fictional or mythical? Some mix of those, or maybe something altogether different?ⁱ

The Gospel of Mark barely mentions the ascension—a simple verse tacked onto the book’s original ending. Matthew doesn’t mention the ascension at all. John references the ascension, but it doesn’t exactly describe or define it.

Luke does something different. The Gospel writer in Luke and in Acts separates the resurrection from the ascension. As we just read, Luke writes that forty days after his resurrection, after he’d spent those weeks teaching and preaching, Jesus “withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.”

To state the obvious, our ideas today about space and time are different from those in Luke's day. The Apostle Paul described a three-tiered universe in Philippians 2:10: "in heaven and on earth and under the earth." That’s how they made sense of both physical and theological space in the first century CE. There was heaven, there was earth, and there was below the earth.

We recognize now, of course, that their understanding was limited by what little they knew of science and physics. That’s not a criticism. I say that with full humility that centuries and millennia from now, what we know will seem so limited to future generations. But all that’s to say, I don’t believe Jesus ascended up and now physically resides among the clouds.

Philosopher Stephen Davis of Claremont University puts it this way:



I do not believe that in the Ascension Jesus went up, kept going until he achieved escape velocity from earth, and then kept moving until he got to heaven, as if heaven were located somewhere in space. The Ascension of Jesus was primarily a change of state rather than a change of location. Jesus changed in the Ascension from being present in the realm of space and time to being present in the realm of eternity, in the transcendent heavenly realm.ⁱⁱ

In other words, the ascension is a theological affirmation rather than a cosmological observation.

Early Christians were wrestling with the question of how Jesus could be both present and absent after his death and resurrection. How is it that we proclaim he is still with us—and yet he is not with us physically?

The better way to think of ascension is not so much spatial, but about presence and absence—Jesus is now going to be present in the world in a new way, a new form. Jesus reorients the disciples. They were anticipating some sort of geopolitical change with Jesus’ return, but the change is that he reorients their expectations. What’s going to break forth is going to break forth among them. It would be their new role to manifest the good news of the gospel.

When I was in high school, Tim LeHaye’s *Left Behind* book series was really popular. I never read them. But I remember other youth groups reading them together and friends going to see the movie when it was released. The premise of the story is that millions of people suddenly vanish from earth and frantic "survivors" of the disappearances begin their search for their friends and families, as well as answers to what has happened. What they discover is that the rapture has taken place and the “good, faithful” people were taken up to heaven—all who remain are the unsaved, left to make their way in the “End Times.”

What we have here in Luke, however, is the opposite of such a scene. Jesus has suddenly ascended into heaven, and his best men, the apostles, for goodness’ sake, are left behind—or, rather, left to carry forward. While Jesus was taken up into heaven, the disciples were charged to stay and to carry the Word to the world. Not rejected by God, but sent by God, in great joy, to live and love as Jesus did.

The ascension reminds us that we cannot limit God. While God came to us in the flesh and blood of Jesus, the ascension reminds us that we cannot restrict God to any one place. Thus, Jesus’ ascension isn’t about his leaving—his disciples, us, the world—but rather it is about the



simultaneous confession that God has chosen to be located in our physical world so that God may be accessible to us, and God refuses to be limited even to those important places.

No building, no people, no book, no church can limit God's ability to be accessible to others.

Instead, the ascension it challenges us to ask ourselves, how are we witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ? How do we recognize Christ's presence among us?

In a sermon on the ascension, Barbara Lunblad reflects on an image she once saw of Jesus' ascension.ⁱⁱⁱ It was a black and white woodcut print, finely etched. In the picture, Jesus is rising up as the disciples watch him ascend into the clouds. And on the ground, you can see footprints on the earth. The artist had carefully etched Jesus' footprints down on the level where the disciples are standing with their mouths gaping open. Perhaps the artist was simply imagining a homey detail that isn't in the text. Or, perhaps, the artist is pressing us not to look up, but to look down—to notice Jesus' muddy footprints all over the gospels.

- Can you picture Jesus' footprints in the wilderness? Each time he was tempted, he clung to the words of the Torah. "One does not live by bread alone." "Worship the Lord your God and serve only God."
- Can you picture Jesus' footprints on the wrong side of the tracks or the wrong side of the road with the wrong sorts of people?
- Can you picture Jesus' footprints walking up to the trunk of a sycamore tree and inviting down Zacchaeus, of all people?
- Can you picture Jesus' footprints walking and then riding into Jerusalem?
- Can you picture Jesus' footprints stumbling toward Golgotha, loving us to the very end?

The Holy Spirit moved Jesus in certain directions. This is the road map he followed. This is how he calls us to follow.

The Spirit that anointed Jesus then, anoints you and me as his disciples now. That's what Jesus tried to tell his disciples before he left them—that he would not leave them alone.

He blessed them. He blesses us. The work was theirs. The work is ours.

Behind you, on the stained-glass windows of our Narthex, we see the scene of Jesus' ascension. Near the very tip top of that grand triangular window is a hand held in blessing. A blessing from above—a blessing given long ago—a blessing that is ours even today.



The gospel doesn't end here. As v53 says, they “were continually in the temple blessing God.” There is an unended-ness to this story – and unended-ness to this scene. We are called to see where Jesus’ footsteps have been, and we are called to follow. We are blessed and beloved and called to follow.

ⁱ Dan Clendenin. “Taken Up to Heaven: The Ascension of Jesus.” Journey with Jesus, May 14, 2023, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3570>.

ⁱⁱ Stephen T. Davis. “The Meaning of the Ascension for Christian Scholars.” Reformed Journal, April 16, 2007, <https://reformedjournal.com/the-meaning-of-the-ascension-for-christian-scholars/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Lunblad. “Footprints on the Earth.” Day1, May 8, 2005, https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20025f1/footprints_on_the_earth.

