

Sermon by The Rev. David R. Hackett
Easter VII, May 16, 2010

A friend of mine, who is an agnostic, once looked through one of my prayer books and noted the observance of such days as The Transfiguration and The Ascension and asked me, "You don't really believe all that stuff, do you?" I thought it was a fair question. How about you? Do you really believe "all that stuff?" Perhaps, more than we want to admit, we have problems with some of the traditional beliefs and teachings of the Church.

Every Sunday when you and I gather here to worship we stand and say the Nicene Creed. When we do that we state what we as the Church, the community of faith, believe. The Creed is basically a condensed version, a shorthand version, of the Bible. In it we recite the central events of the life of Jesus: his birth, death, resurrection and ascension. We celebrate his birth at Christmas. We commemorate his death on Good Friday. We rejoice at his resurrection throughout these fifty days of Easter. But his ascension into heaven hardly gets mentioned.

Our Lord was raised from the dead and for forty days he appeared at various times and places to his disciples. Then he ascended into heaven. For ten more days his followers met together and prayed as they had been directed by him. And then fifty days after the Day of Resurrection the gift of the Holy Spirit was given to the Church and the great evangelical expansion into the world began. We will celebrate that event next Sunday on the Feast of Pentecost.

But the ascension of Jesus, coming as it does forty days after Easter Day, always occurs on a Thursday, and so it sort of gets lost. It was last Thursday. Did any of you remember? I want us to focus on it this morning.

After this sermon you are going to stand up and say, "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." What does that mean? Don't we sometimes simply say the words, but don't really think about them? Maybe we don't really "buy into" them.

The Acts of the Apostles describe Jesus' ascending into heaven this way, "As the apostles were watching, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." What sort of picture do you form in your mind when you hear this? Over the centuries various artists have tried to paint it. Usually Jesus is piously looking up to heaven and there are clouds around him as he goes up. I have to confess I always end up with something resembling a lift-off at Cape Canaveral!

Aside from saying that Jesus is no longer physically in the world, what is the truth being expressed here? St. Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, paints a picture with words. Like an impressionist he is working with imagery which points beyond the concrete to the unseen. He paints a picture with words that describes Jesus as going "up" as if heaven were a geographical location high in the sky. That reflects a first-century construct of the cosmos. However most of us don't believe that heaven is physically and literally "up" there. Yet we traditionally and normally say "up in heaven." At the same time most of us would agree that heaven is not a physical place, but a state of being. To be in heaven is to be with God, to be in union with the divine.

But it is natural for us to picture heaven in terms of "up-ness". We speak of many things that way. When things get better or things go well, they go "up". "His grades went up," we say. Or, "she has really gone up in her profession." We know when we say this that success is not a place that is literally up; it is a state of being.

When you say the Creed I hope you'll remember these three things: 1) the Ascension means that Jesus is no longer limited to time and space; 2) he ascended as a human being; and 3) his ascension represents the triumph of good over evil.

First, the matter of time and space. The scandal of Christianity has always been the Incarnation, the belief that the God of the universe would limit himself to time and space, would enflesh himself in a human being. In a sense, the Ascension is the reversal of the Incarnation. Through the Ascension the particularity of Jesus becomes the universality of Christ. Another way of putting it: the God of “somewhere”, becomes the God of “everywhere.” The localized Jesus becomes the ubiquitous Christ.

A few years ago bumper sticker theology was popular. One bumper sticker read, “My boss is a Jewish carpenter.” It was cute. It got your attention. But it was terrible theology because it ignored the Ascension. Jesus is no longer the carpenter from Nazareth. He is the cosmic Christ. He is not longer limited to time and space as he was in first century Palestine, but is living today enthroned in the hearts of believers everywhere. Jesus is no dead hero whom we remember from the past, but is alive and present in the universe now as the Christ.

One of the few things I’ve learned about the Islamic religion is that good Muslims pray five times a day. And when they do so they face Mecca, a physical geographical location. When we Christians pray we don’t face Jerusalem, a physical location. Why? Because of the Ascension. The cosmic Christ is everywhere. We are not tied to geography. We are not tied to a region of the world. That’s one of the reasons Christianity is catholic, universal.

Secondly, it is important that we understand that Jesus ascended as a human being. He doesn’t leave his humanity behind at the Ascension. His humanity is not an illusion as the Gnostics would have us believe. He doesn’t cast his humanity off as an unwelcome burden with which he is finished. He takes his humanity with him. He takes *our* humanity with him. After all, our humanity is not limited to physicality.

Jesus the Christ has shown us what we can be and who we are meant to be. The Ascension tells us that the life for which we are ultimately made is not to be found in this world. What that means to me is that no human being is insignificant. It means that no life is unimportant because every person, in Christ, has a divine destiny. Every one of you, every one of God’s children, is destined for heaven.

With that perspective all of our relationships take on a new importance. For when we deal with one another, when we share each other’s problems, when we seek to alleviate suffering, when we work for peace, when we seek to make society better and more responsive to human need, as you and I try to serve and minister in our various vocations, we are in touch with a child of God who has a divine destiny.

And the third significance of the Ascension I want you to consider this morning is the belief that Christ is the Lord of History. St. Luke wrote, “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” So, we are not to fear. And that, my friends, indeed calls for faith, faith that most of us find most difficult. Because in the midst of the mess of this world we are called to the Christian hope. In a world beset by terrorists, a world in which barbarism is becoming the norm, where religions are excuses for the inhuman treatment of God’s children, a world which refuses to eschew the futility of violence and war, and mocks the Prince of Peace; in this chaotic existence of ours the Ascension tells us that Jesus will return, and the history of which we are a part has purpose and an end.

As Christ’s Body, the Church, you and I play a part in this salvation-history of the world. We participate in the struggle of good versus evil. We are not called to stand idly and silently by, but are called to proclaim the values of Christ: of love over hate, of peace over war, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

In this world of ours where justice and love seem just so much wishful thinking, nothing takes greater faith than this. And these acts of faith are based on the Christian hope that at the end of history is triumph of justice and good which is symbolized by Christ's coming again to rule the earth.

As my skeptical friend would ask, "Do you believe all that stuff?" It's a good question. Do you? Only by the grace of God can we day say, "Yes, I believe."

Amen.