

Arise

Sermon given on Ascension Day, May 25, 2017.

Early this morning, I was driving here from Hackettstown in torrential rains. When I arrived, the winds became very wild, blowing the leaves all over the place. This is definitely not a proper Ascension Day- not at all. What do you suppose Jesus would have done if this kind of weather appeared on the day he had planned to fly up to heaven? I certainly would think that he would have changed the day to fly because this is definitely not a good flying day. Ascension would have been a different day. No one would fly today.

In today's gospel from Luke we hear, "while he was blessing them, he withdrew from them, and was carried up into heaven."

The book of acts says, "When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Ascension Day is the day the present Lord became absent, which may be why it is the most forgotten day of the church year. Who wants to celebrate being left behind? Who wants to celebrate the day that Jesus left this world, never to be seen again? Hungry as we are for the presence of god, the one thing we do not need is a day to remind us of god's absence.

Does this flight up into the sky sound familiar to you? Have you heard of anyone in this day and age disappearing from a place here on earth into space? I guess I have to say yes to that, although I, myself, do not watch space science events or the many stories that have people disappearing from this earth into space- stories, comic books, movies, TV shows, you name it. We have people flying all over the place. I am sure that many people here on earth avidly watch all sorts of programs where space men and others fly up into space and disappear. Does this make Jesus our first spaceman? Have any of you who are interested in space based programs thought about this?

Of course, Jesus' purpose for this flight is very different from the purposes of modern-day space people. Modern day people are curious about what is up there. Yes, this is all part of what god has created, but what is up there? Can one eventually live there, is there water on what we call planets, and are there people or aliens living anywhere up there? We have already had a few people travel up there and actually visit a planet, but travel there has not yet been a common event- but maybe someday? Who knows! But yes, one could almost say that Jesus does qualify as a space person back in his day.

On the first Ascension Day, Jesus led his disciples to a mount called Olivet just outside of Jerusalem, spoke to them for the last time, and then disappeared for good.

It's interesting that in the first chapter of the book of acts, one moment, Jesus was with them and the next moment, he was gone, his well-known hand raised in final blessing, his face grown bright and indistinct, his familiar shape vanishing into the fog like the end of a dream too good to be true- all of it slipping out of their reach until he was no longer there for them, no longer present but past, a memory that would haunt them to the end of their time.

Where did he go? Well, according to tradition, he went to heaven- which may not be up, as much as it is beyond- and what he went to do there was to finish what he had begun with us.

God was born into the body of the world, but that was not enough, that was just his Christmas gift to us. His Ascension gift to us was that through him, the body of the world was borne back to god. By Jesus' presentation of his own risen body to be seated at the right hand of god. He paved the way for us so that when we arrive there some time later, everyone will be not so shocked. By ascending bodily into heaven, he showed us that flesh and blood are good; they are good enough for Jesus, good enough for heaven, good enough for god. Jesus not only brought god to us; he has also brought us to god.

Where did Jesus go? Well, it seems he went up! Is that why, when a child asks where God is, one usually points up to the sky saying, "God is up there." is he? What do you think? Is that where Jesus and God are?

As Jesus disappeared from their sight, two men in white appeared next to the disciples and said, "Men of galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go onto heaven."

These men in white- angels, told them if they wanted to see Jesus again, it was no use looking up. It would be better if they should look around instead, look at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their ordinary lives, because that is where they are much more likely to find him- not the way, they used to know him, but the new way, not in his own body, but in their bodies, the risen, the ascended Lord who was no longer anywhere on earth so that he could be everywhere instead. An amazing thing happened that day- that day of the Ascension- when they all stopped looking into the sky and looked at each other instead.

if you wish to look at Jesus as being our first spaceman, that is strictly your choice- but remember that the important message from this gospel and the book of acts is that Jesus is not gone- that Jesus has not really gone to heaven and is sitting at the right hand of god. Not really. No, you cannot see him as the disciples had, but he is here! He is within each and every one of us. By his resurrection, he has the right to give eternal life to any human, and by his Ascension our Lord enters heaven and keeps the door open for humanity.

We go to church to worship, to acknowledge the Lord's absence and to seek the Lord's presence, to sing and to pray, to be silent and to be still, to hold out our empty hands to be filled with bread, with wine, with the abiding presence of the absent Lord until he comes again. Do you miss him sometimes? Do you long for assurance that you have not been left behind? Then tell me, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Look around you, look within yourself. You will find him! Amen.