

Ascension Day 2021

Mark 16: 15-20 Acts 1 1 – 11 Ps 93 Ephesians 1: 15-23

The event that has come to be known as ‘the Ascension’ is recorded by Mark and Luke in their Gospels, by Luke in the book of Acts and by Paul in some of his letters.

The reference in Mark 16 is believed to come from a very late manuscript which almost certainly relied on Luke’s account. So, it seems to be a particular emphasis for Luke as he is the only one who describes it as a visual event witnessed by others. Many scholars question this, saying that he has given dramatic concrete form to what is – rather – a theological and spiritual truth.

That suggests that we need to be careful of trying to understand it over-literally – suggesting that Jesus went up to heaven somewhere above clouds. It’s more likely that it is a pictorial, symbolic description of how Christ’s way of being in the world changed. Saying that is not to deny the event but to admit that what did happen lies beyond simple, literal description, and beyond the reach of our intellect and imagination.

This is also not to downplay the importance of the Ascension, after all, it’s included in those great statements of our faith, both the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed.

So why was it so important to Luke, and to us?

One scholar said: “The Ascension cannot be forgotten. It must not be ignored. For without the Ascension, the death and resurrection of Jesus would carry far less value, if any, in the plan of redemption. It is this glorious Ascension that is the culmination of the atoning work of Christ, the guarantee of his promises, the proof of his claims, and the beginning of his dominion.” – Bible.org

This points to a way of looking at the Ascension that I find helpful – it’s the Big Picture approach rather than the microscope view. Veterinary Science student – got herself tied in knots over doctrine of Ascension, ended up doubting God, worrying that she was losing her faith.

Being a scientist, she wanted to take a scientific approach to the Ascension, but of course it cannot stand up to scientific demands of being repeatable, verifiable and observable.

But if we stand back, look at it in context of whole divine plan of redemption, it falls into place as one of the steps on the road towards reconciliation between God and humanity. As Jesus explains to disciples: “This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me..”

After Ascension, Christ is no longer present as a particular human being who occupies a particular place and time. This must have been a hard truth for the disciples who thought they had lost him in the Crucifixion, and then got him back through the Resurrection and now they’re going to lose him again, or so it seems...

However, through the Ascension, it can be said that Jesus becomes more *abundantly* even *super-abundantly* present and active than he was before.

Christ is, says Luke, now present as the Church, the body of Christian believers brought into being and inspired by the very Spirit that made Jesus who and what he was.

That is the story that continues in Luke’s Book of Acts of Apostles, which should perhaps be called Acts of the Holy Spirit (HS) because that more correctly captures the essence of the content: HS through the first disciples spreading Gospel, building kingdom.

I am always amused by the Ascension Day reading from Acts because in the picture we have of the disciples, I see the church and I see myself.

The former Archbishop of CT, Desmond Tutu once said: “The Anglican church is very good at giving answers to questions that no one is asking.” i.e. we are not always entirely sure what is going on or perhaps even what is supposed to be going on. That describes the disciples yet again in the today’s story in Acts: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” they ask.

Poor old disciples.... Jesus first tells them off gently “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” and then draws their attention back to the plot: that they will be equipped with the power of HS to be his witnesses and carry his message to the world.

And then, the disciples are told off again, this time by two men dressed in white who appear as they’re standing staring open-mouthed into the sky wondering about what has just happened and where Jesus has gone.

To me, the present time feels a bit like that, it seems that God is doing a new thing in the church and I am standing, wondering what is going on, and, perhaps staring in the wrong direction. Change is in the air, old forms and structures are shifting but it isn't yet clear what the new thing is.

Archbishop Tutu visited a religious community in Rome has Crucifix in the chapel, with a Christ who has no hands. He asked about it; was told it was to remind community that *they* are the hands of Christ in the world.

As we know, the task entrusted to the disciples has been passed down to us, we follow in their footsteps. Rowan Williams describes it as “a chain of human contact coming down to our own day, a chain of voices and faces in which Jesus is active”.

I am comforted by the idea, that even though I'm not entirely sure what is going on, I still have a place in writing the unfinished story of the Book of the Acts of the HS. We and all believers are still busy writing that story.

In a sense this is facilitated by the feast we celebrate today, the Ascension, which allowed Jesus to be no longer subject to the restraints of a particular time and place, but “super-abundantly” present and active through us, his body, the Church.

References

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