

Ascension Day, the 40th day of Easter was this past Thursday. And today on the Sunday after Ascension Day, we read a lesson from the first chapter of Acts telling of Jesus' ascension into heaven. The Ascension of Jesus is perhaps one the most difficult things for modern, 21st century Christians to understand. The idea of Jesus rising up into the air, past the clouds into Heaven seems extremely old fashioned. It's definitely bizarre, if you think about it. Jesus going up to heaven like a rocket. Or maybe he goes more slowly floating like a balloon. Some old paintings even show the hand of God reaching down from heaven pulling Jesus up.

That's what makes the Ascension so strange for us. We know what the conditions are 20 miles up. We've sent astronauts up through the sky. They don't hit heaven—they hit the vacuum of outer space.

Yet, week after week, we say in the creeds that we believe that Jesus "ascended into heaven."

So what does that mean for us?
What are we to make of the Ascension?

First of all, we have to remember that our ancestors had a different world view about the construction of the universe. Two thousand years ago, many people commonly believed that the world had three layers, three stories. Heaven above, hell below, and earth in the middle.

Yet today, we don't think about heaven as a physical place "up there." Heaven doesn't exist floating above us in outer space. We tend to think of it as a different dimension, not a different physical place.

So what are we to make of these accounts?

First, I would say that we have to cut biblical authors some slack. They are always doing the best they can do relate events based on their worldview. So if Luke, when he wrote the book of Acts was under the impression that heaven was physically, "up there," that's understandable given his context.

But second, I would suggest that maybe we don't need to be so hasty in poo-pooing Luke.

You can make a strong argument that Luke's account in Acts is far more nuanced than it appears on the surface.

Luke says, "As they were watching, (Jesus) was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."¹

But "lifted up" can be translated different ways. It can be translated in spatial terms: Jesus literally "going up."

¹ Acts 1:9

But it can also be translated in spiritual terms: Jesus being exalted.

So an alternate translation of Acts would read, "As they were watching, (Jesus) was exalted, and a cloud took him out of their sight."

Hmm—that sounds a bit different. It sounds more like Jesus disappearing into a heavenly cloud. Jesus being exalted into a heavenly state as the cloud envelops him.

The cloud, by the way is a common metaphor in scripture for God's presence. God appears often in clouds. God's presence is both revealed and concealed in the cloud. God's glory is both made known and made hidden in the cloud.

So maybe Luke is not thinking about Jesus rising into the air. Yes, many people in the first century thought that that heaven was "up" in the sky. Yet, not everyone in Luke's time thought that. Centuries before, the philosopher Plato talked about heaven in very different terms, and his school of thought was still influential in the first century world.

For Plato, heaven is a place that is more real than this world. It is a place where the perfect and the ideal is made known. And what we see in this world is a shadow, an imperfect projection of the perfect reality of heaven. It is a dimension that overlaps this world. But it is far more real than this world.

So does Luke think heaven is "up there?" Or does he see heaven as the real reality, the dimension that stands behind the world we see. It's hard to say. You could argue both ways.

We know that the Epistle to the Hebrews is heavily influenced by Plato's worldview. But the first chapter of Acts? That's not so clear.

So we're not sure what worldview Luke had in mind when talking about Jesus' ascension. It hinges on your choice of translation, whether Jesus is being lifted up, or being exalted.

On top of that, you can also translate the disciple's reaction a couple different ways.

Luke says, "While (Jesus) was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"²

The disciples are said to be gazing up and looking up toward heaven. But that could also translated slightly differently.

It could read that the disciples were gazing "into heaven," looking "into heaven," peering into the heavenly dimension.

² Acts 1:10-11

So maybe Luke was intending to tell us about Jesus being lifted up like a rocket or like a balloon.

Or maybe he's intending to tell us about Jesus disappearing into the heavenly dimension as he is enveloped by the cloud of God's glory and presence.

And it's hard to know which picture he had in mind.

And yet, having said all that... And yet, regardless of Luke's ideas of where heaven is, I would suggest to you this morning that the Ascension is still good news for us today.

What does the Ascension mean for us?

It means that Jesus left his earthly existence behind. But, more wonderfully, Jesus has taken our human nature with him into heaven to be a part of God's existence. Jesus is no longer physically present on earth. Jesus' presence is elsewhere. He now reigns in glory.

The point of the Ascension is, Jesus is somewhere else. Jesus is no longer tied and bound to a human body. Jesus no longer runs around on this planet making appearances in his resurrected body. He doesn't fly from continent to continent in a private jet, preaching in different stadiums. He's not out there signing autographs, or shaking hands.

Instead, he's somewhere else. He has a much grander and much more glorious existence. He has carried our humanity back to God, so that one day, we too may be with God.

That's what the Creeds are telling us. "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." In other words, Jesus has a new type of existence. He is not restricted to space and time as we finite human creatures are. Instead he is Lord of all times and all places. His activity is no longer restricted to first century Israel. He is instead alive and active everywhere, even in Lubbock, Texas, even in the 21st century.

But though Jesus is no longer on earth in his resurrected body, Jesus has left behind a new body.

He is here still here in a physical sense, with a new body, a body of which you and I are part. The book of Ephesians tells us that Jesus' new body is the church, of which he is the head. In a very real sense, Jesus is here, in us, his church. We are his arms and legs in the world. We are his hands to do his work.

That's the last thing Jesus tells his disciples. "You are my witnesses." You're the ones who are to carry on my message. You are the ones to do my work in the world. I'll be with you. I'll send the Holy Spirit to empower you. But the work is yours.

The first chapter of Acts is one of those in between times. Jesus has ascended into heaven. One day, Jesus will return in glory. In the meantime, in the in-between time, he has left us here to do his work.

Right after the Ascension, two angels appear to the disciples and say, "Hey, why are you guys standing around looking into heaven?" That question is a good reminder to us. We're not called to just stand around. We've got important things to do. God has given us an important task. We are called to do God's work, to be Jesus' body, to be Jesus hands in the world.

Jesus has gone up on high. He has vanquished death. He has conquered the powers of hell. He sits at the right hand of God.

And he calls us to be his body. He calls us to do his work. "You are my witnesses, to the ends of the earth."

How should we respond?

Perhaps in the words of one of our post-communion prayers:

"And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord."³

³ BCP p366