

When, Jesus, When?

May 4, 2008

Acts 1:1-11

What to do with the Ascension? That used to be something I pondered. Actually, I suppose if I was honest I would have to admit that I didn't even ponder it all that much. And I suppose that's partially because it wasn't dealt with much in the church I grew up in. I suppose it's also because of my tendency not to put too much stock in taking stories in the bible too literally if they conflict with my way of perceiving the world through the lenses of modern science. That hasn't always been the attitude of the church though.

Way back in the Middle Ages, Ascension Day was considered one of the most important Christian holidays. It was a day celebrated with much pageantry. Churches in the Middle Ages were known for presenting the biblical stories on stained glass windows and with ornate altar carvings. It was that visual tradition that birthed the pageantry associated with Ascension Day.

The pageantry often featured a "mannequin representing the Rising Christ, hoisted by rope either up to the ceiling or through an opening in the roof. At times, the rising was followed by a basketful of rose petals poured back down to symbolize the later descent of the Spirit on Pentecost."¹

In more recent years I've come to realize that there is more to the Ascension story than what happened physically to Jesus. If we spend too much time trying to reconcile the Ascension with our modern scientific way of viewing things, we miss the story's real importance for the church historically and for us practically.

I've come to realize that the point of the Ascension story is that the early church had to come to grips with their future – that is, they had to come to the point where they understood that it was up to them to share the message, live out the faith, and that the message Jesus had shared and lived among them was for everyone. Basically, the Ascension jump-started the spread of Christianity. It prepared the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Ascension needed to happen in order for God's plan for eternity, the rest of time, to be revealed and continued.

The physician Luke is credited with writing both the book of Acts and the Gospel of Luke. Both books were written to Theophilus. Now, Theophilus can also be translated "friend of God" which Bible scholars suggest means that it could have been Luke's intention to share these things with either an individual named Theophilus or he could have intended to write them to anyone who was or is a friend of God's. The point remains the same: there was a body of people who were eager to hear more about this Christian faith – its origin – its history – its meaning.²

Basically, the Gospel of Luke is about the story of Jesus' life upon the earth and his teachings. It is Volume One, if you will, of the story of Christianity. The Book of Acts is Volume Two and it's the story of the birth of the church and its early growth. The two books are connected so that the one ends with the same story with which the other begins. And that story is the story of the Ascension.

One of the underlying biases surfacing in the early church was an awareness that the faith Jesus had proclaimed was meant for more than a remnant of Judaism – that it was a religion for everyone. In Barclay's commentary he notes Luke's including the story of Philip preaching to the Samaritans, Stephen being killed for attempting to make Christianity a universal thing, Peter accepting Cornelius into the church and being killed for his action, Paul traveling far and wide to win all kinds of people for Christ, and the report in Acts 15 of the church making the great decision to accept Gentiles on equal terms with the Jews.³ There is no question about it, one of the

reasons Luke wrote Acts was to make a case for his belief that Christianity is a faith for all no matter what ethnic group or social group or economic group we are apart of.

But, it is the opinion of many that the primary reason Luke wrote Acts was to highlight the rapid growth of the Christian movement and the contributing factors that aided that mega-growth. In just thirty years the young religion and its message about Jesus Christ spread from the humble beginning in a tiny little corner of Palestine to the far reaches of the Roman empire and the most influential and most powerful city of that day – Rome. And it was the Ascension, as far as Luke was concerned, that changed that small disillusioned band of followers into an enthusiastic, empowered, energized, alive, hopeful, community of faith.⁴

Jesus appeared several times to the disciples during those forty days between his resurrection and the ascension trying to get them to understand the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection. He tried to introduce them to a proper understanding of the Kingdom of God and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Luke reported that the disciples were still confused even on this final day of Christ's presence on earth, the day of Ascension, by his recording of the question they asked Jesus: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" Despite all he had said to them, they still had in their minds that there was going to be a blood-bath – that there was going to be a military return of Jesus so that the ship would be righted and they would be saved from themselves and the Romans.

A few years ago a red cow was born on a farm in northern Israel. The cow was named Melody. Some orthodox Jews have absolutely gone berserk over this development because they claim that it is the first red heifer born in Israel in 2000 years. They take her birth to be a "divine sign that the time is right for Yahweh's intervention, for the destruction of the Dome of the Rock and the mosques that now occupy the Temple Mount, and the rebuilding of the Jewish temple." They note the biblical appearance of the red heifer in the 19th chapter of Numbers which describes ritual cleansing using the ashes of a slaughtered red heifer.⁵ The text reads: "A red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish and on which no yoke has been laid."

"Lord, we see this red heifer. Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" they ask. "When, Jesus, When?" "Now, Jesus?" "Is this the time, Jesus?"

Preacher Steven Mosley recalls in one of his books of a time when something strange happened to his grandmother. "A loud rumbling noise erupted throughout her neighborhood, and the night sky filled with a green and purple light. Steven's grandmother was convinced that aliens were landing in her yard. And what was her first thought? That she needed to fix her hair. If she was receiving a visitation from anyone, human or alien, then she needed to look her best. But the aliens never knocked on her door. The noises and the green and purple lights came from an explosion at a nearby natural gas plant."⁶

There's no question hers was a foolish reaction, but no more foolish really than our Christian brothers and sisters down through the centuries that have acted upon their perceived date for Christ's return. When will we take Jesus at his word: "Not even I am privy to such information. Only God knows such things." "When, Jesus, When?" is not a question Jesus wants us to bother our minds with. Jesus wants his followers to get ready for the Holy Spirit and the ministry of witnessing instead of worrying about some future life or time of power or influence or relief.

And, to emphasize what he really wanted to have happen from then on, Jesus ascended – he went away in a real way. He dramatically, completely and emphatically answered their question. “It’s time for you to spread out – to go your separate ways and share the good news about the loving and forgiving God I have revealed to you. It’s time for you to go and do – go and share – go. And, in order for you to spread out and for me to remain with you, I have to get up in the press box and I have to put someone else in charge down here so that I can communicate with all of you wherever you go. And you will know what I want you to do and say because I will communicate it through the Holy Spirit God is sending to replace me. I will be able to fulfill my ministry of ruling over the whole world by going to be with God. You are now to move into the world to continue doing my work in my physical absence.”⁷ That’s the way Bishop William Willimon put it in his sermon “God Has Gone Up.”

Willimon went on in that sermon to make the point that the Ascension is about Jesus Christ changing locations of influence. He went in order to continue and to expand his influence and effectiveness. He’s still in charge – he still rules – he still calls the shots – only in a new way – from a new perspective.⁸

The final thing I want us to take a look at is the way today’s text ends. The disciples were described as looking skyward – towards where they last saw Jesus. And two men in white robes approached them and asked them a question: “Uh, why are you standing here looking out in space?” “Why are you lamenting his departure?” “Why are you spending time looking where he no longer is? “Why are you standing around waiting?” And then they tried to both comfort and, I think by doing so, to prod the followers out of their lethargy. “It’s time for you to go and trust what he has told you and to do what he has instructed you to do.” “Trust him when he says that God is sending someone to be with you and go.”

I’m afraid it’s still a problem we Christians have – this feeling that we can’t do it on our own – this feeling frightened, confused, helpless, disappointed – this feeling that only when Christ returns will life be worth anything – this gazing off into space and waiting for something to happen in heaven – this being so heavenly bound that we’re no earthly good.

Ersine White, in his sermon Pie in the Sky, referred to such an understanding of the Christian faith as “pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye” religion. He said, “When Jesus went to the cross on Calvary’s hill, He took our sins upon Himself, but not our responsibilities. He is asking us, ‘Why are you standing around looking at heaven?’ He is saying to us, ‘You’ve got a life to lead here on earth, so get busy with it!’ The problem with walking through life looking up at the heavens is that you can fall into a ditch and never see it coming.”⁹

The problem with “pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye” Christianity is that it often results in a Christianity that uses faith as a reason not to do anything about personal or world problems – it is used as an excuse for churches and Christians not to do anything. A standing around, gawking up at the sky church isn’t good for anything except taking up space. A church made up of star-gazers and heaven-watchers (as I referenced them a few years ago in another sermon on this text) is a church destined to die or destined for at least irrelevance.

The Ascension is about challenging us to understand that the work of Jesus Christ’s is now ours to do – it’s about getting our eyes off the glories of the resurrection, the heavenly Jesus and refocusing our eyes on where Jesus is in our lives and in our world in our day – it’s about letting the Holy Spirit work within us and among us – it’s about getting us to not be so absorbed about life after death that we are no earthly good. God will take care of the future in God’s time – we need to be about ministering, living, sharing the good news today.

The purpose of the church, according to this portion of Acts, is to scatter – to share outside the walls – to recognize the Holy Spirit’s presence and help wherever we are. We are every one of us ministers and we are ministers wherever we are. That’s what the Ascension is about.

1. The Clergy Journal, January, 2008, p. 34.
2. Homiletics, “No Way Jesus,” p. 43.
3. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series: The Acts of the Apostles (Edinburgh, Scotland: The St. Andrew Press, 1955), p. xvi.
4. Ibid.
5. King Duncan, “On Telling Time With Computers and (holy Red) Cows,” Collected Sermons Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.
6. Steven Mosley, Secrets of the Mustard Seed (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), pp. 75-76.
7. William H. Willimon, “God Has Gone Up,” Pulpit Resource, April – June, 2002, p. 26.
8. Ibid.
9. Erskine White, *Pie in the Sky*.