

The Ascension, or, What's "up" got to do with it?—Judy Cox

Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Did any of you receive an Ascension Day card this week? Me either! You'd think some bright marketer would at least come up with oversized balloon bouquets for the occasion. Remember the little monkey, Curious George, clutching the balloons and floating away from his friend in the yellow hat? But neither have I received an Ascension Day balloon bouquet...

We don't do the Ascension very well; it often slides by between the Resurrection and Pentecost, without much notice. The alternate readings offered by the lectionary for this 7th Sunday of Easter only encourage that. But every Sunday, as we declare our faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed, we affirm that Jesus "ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God." Have you ever wondered why the early church thought it necessary to include the Ascension in this so-brief summary of Christian faith? The Ascension is **not** an isolated event, irrelevant to the gospel. Note how our texts link Ascension with Resurrection! The significance of Jesus' Resurrection and exaltation at Ascension meet as two parts of a whole.

In fact, the author of Luke/Acts finds the Ascension so essential that he includes it twice. You might call it a kind of two-part, reinforced hinge, connecting the two books. As we have already noticed, on Ascension Sunday the lectionary gives us both sections of that hinge in our Scriptures.

Other passages in Luke's Gospel emphasize the theme of Jesus' Ascension as well. Following the Transfiguration account, we heard the foreshadowing that *the days drew near for him to be taken up*—that day has arrived! Forms of that same "taking up" verb appear four times in the Ascension account in Acts. This is that day!

Are there any other science fiction geeks out there, rejoicing in the reruns of "Stargate" on Channel 11's COMET-TV? (If you are watching for the first time: spoiler alert! You might want to plug your ears...) After a few exciting years in which SG-1 saves Earth from the interplanetary menace of the Goa'uld, the show seems to self-destruct, in my humble opinion. Character Daniel Jackson (and some nasty bad guys) "ascend" to a higher plane of existence, becoming powerful "ascended beings"—very gnostic, very much working to change themselves through right thinking and attitudes.

Do you catch the difference? Did you notice as the Scriptures were read? Technically, Jesus does not actively ascend. Notice: *he was taken up...was lifted up...has been taken up...was carried up*. These passive verbs are what theologians call the "divine passive"—instead, Jesus is taken up, and is seated. He neither rises up on his own nor seats himself. God the Father acts to bring this about! Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, coming from the very heart of God, is raised in power and exalted in glory by the First Person.

The pairing of the Resurrection and Ascension, within the larger sweep of Scripture, reveals the interaction among the Three-in-One that is/are the Triune God. Consider that Divine relationship

as a Circle of Love, which like a whirlpool (or even tornado, or vortex) draws into itself all around it. There is a “vortex of love” within the Trinity; the Trinity itself/themself IS a vortex of love that draws us in. As theologian Ronald Cole-Turner explains: “The triune God is active love, reaching out to [bring] the whole creation into fellowship.” This movement manifests most fully in Christ’s coming down in love, and in love being taken up. Can you see the circle? And then, to anticipate Pentecost next week, the identical movement recurs. In love the Holy Spirit is sent, Who is the Love between the Father and the Son. This Love works to “[transform] creation until all things are gathered up in the endless fellowship” and love of the triune God!

Let’s take a closer look at what our texts say about this gathering, this taking up. What’s “up” got to do with it?

Back in Luke’s Transfiguration account Moses and Elijah appear with the glorified Jesus and discuss, literally, his “exodus.” Here in Luke 24 AND Acts 1, Jesus’ being taken up, in his “exodus” from earth, mirrors Elijah’s departure into the heavens in a fiery chariot. The language does imply “upness” within their culture and worldview, and links Jesus, as Luke seeks to do, with the ultimate prophet, Elijah.

But “ascending,” in the language of the Bible and the Church, and even in our language today, isn’t always about going “up.”

I worried about my nephew, then a youngest child, still in high school and at home, after his older siblings both left for college. “Does it feel lonely?” I asked him, doing the loving and understanding aunt. (And being that loving and understanding aunt, I did get his permission to tell this story...) How little I knew—he almost laughed in my face! Lonely? Being doted on, with only his preferences shaping the family menus, and parental focus? “No, Aunt Judy,” Matthew assured me, “when the older ones finally leave the prince ascends to his rightful throne!”

In the Bible and in the church, Jesus’ ascension, like my nephew’s, has little to do with “up.” Jesus is taken **to the place where God rules, God reigns**. And THAT describes heaven much better than any discussion of “up” vs. “down.” We remind ourselves of this definition every week when we pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” Jesus’ being taken to where God **reigns** matters—the language of ascension is, primarily, the language of enthronement, being seated on the throne to reign. What changes for Jesus is not just his location, but his status.

Luke hints at this elsewhere: listen to how Jesus begins the parable of the ten talents in Luke, immediately before the Triumphal Entry: *a nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. He summoned ten of his slaves, and so forth...* (Clinching the tie-in with the Ascension, Luke prefaces with an explanation of why Jesus told this parable now: *because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately*. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?!? In our Acts passage, too, the disciples need to stop obsessing over “Kingdom—now!”)

Yes, the language of Ascension is, most of all, that of enthronement. Per our Ephesians text, and other early Christian hymns, God not only raises Jesus up from the dead, and from earth to heaven, but also *seats him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named*. Jesus, like the nobleman in the parable, receives royal power.

This expectation of power takes center stage in both the Ascension passages. Jesus himself will send the promise of the Father, the power from on high that is the Holy Spirit. So clothed, the disciples will be his witnesses, starting where they are to wait, in Jerusalem. Wait they must, for without this Person, this gift, they remain powerless and loveless. But Spirit-empowered, empowered to love like Jesus loves, their witness will extend out past Jerusalem, into Judea, and Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

While Jesus is blessing them, he is carried up into heaven. The disciples' response is worship! For the first time in this gospel they worship Jesus—fall-down-and-worship, giving homage to their God and King. They return to the city to wait, and the gospel ends as it begins, with notes of *great joy* and *blessing* and the Temple as a center of the action.

Today's lectionary psalm, as you may have noticed, is an enthronement psalm. Perhaps it was one of the Scriptures Jesus *opened* [the disciples'] *minds to understand*. There in Luke he speaks of Scripture being *fulfilled*. Jesus the Messiah fulfills/fills up these Scriptures, full to overflowing, in the same language Paul uses in our Epistle text to describe the Messiah as *him who fills all in all*.

This fulfilling doesn't settle all interpretive questions about Scripture for today. To quote Wesleyan Bible scholar Dennis Bratcher, neither does it "affirm a predestined and predetermined unfolding of all events ... following God's specific plan that eliminates contingency." What Scripture affirms is consistency with Who God is and has always been—Jesus is the embodiment of God to whom the Old Testament Scriptures bear witness. And his Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension together reveal that Divine, Triune vortex of outreaching love, culminating in the gathering up that is God's purpose for creation. What happens to Jesus foreshadows what will happen through the Spirit's working to us! That same movement continues—thanks be to God! In this our own time of waiting for Pentecost, here in this season of Easter, what better to be our psalm of response than this enthronement psalm? Indeed, our *God has gone up*. Let us *shout* too—Jesus our Savior *sits on his holy throne*! Let us continue to pray, waiting alongside those from Manchester to Egypt, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." Like those disciples we can also celebrate with joy and worship, anticipating God's future that Jesus promises. We too are encountered by him in the breaking of the bread and in the opening of Scriptures. We too are brought to understand who he is, and how his coming and being taken up is the culmination of God's self-revelation. And we too know that without the promised empowerment of the Spirit we have no hope of bearing witness to, and loving with, the love of Jesus. With great joy we join the earliest disciples in the worship of Jesus Christ our God and King, blessing and praising the One seated at God's right hand.