

The Ascension Reality

By Dr. Dave Neale

The Church year tells the story of our faith. Seven weeks ago we celebrated Easter. Easter is the resurrection, the victory over death, and Ascension is the *exaltation* of the Lord, as he returns to glory at the right hand of the Father. Next week is the celebration Pentecost – fifty days after Easter/Passover.

What is the Ascension...

There are three incidents of a highly esoteric nature in the gospels. There is the Transfiguration, the Resurrection and the Ascension. In these three instances the veil is drawn back and we see a transcendent reality.

With all three, we feel a natural reserve to speak about them because of their otherworldly nature. These events are as close as Christianity comes to mysticism.

The rabbis of old, of course, also restricted access to the great mystical books of the Hebrew Bible, like Ezekiel, Daniel, and even Ecclesiastes. They were only for the wise and capable who could read them responsibly.¹ Ezekiel would not be read in synagogue, for example. Circumspection about the most difficult books of the Bible is something that Christians would do well to emulate.

Some things are so holy you don't even talk about them.

For example, re the Transfiguration event: ***As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*** (Mark 9:9)

When Paul discusses his vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus in 2 Cor 12:1-7, he uses an odd third person narrative: ***I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up into the third heaven...***

Likewise, the NT is reticent to say much about the Ascension.²

Three of the four gospels do not even mention it. Holy silence.

The one that does, Luke, says only that he ***...withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven*** (Luke 24:51). Luke doesn't even imply they saw anything.

It is only one place in Acts that goes a *bit* further, but still with a great reluctance it seems to me. It is a brief appendix, if you will.

Word of the Day: Epexegetical (“the addition of a word or words to explain a preceding word or sentence”)

So you could say in your next staff meeting at work, after making your point, “And may I just add epexegetically, I think we should go ahead with the hire....”

To the echoing silence of the gospels on the Ascension, we have only this comment in Acts 1:9 – ***When he has said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.***³

There is a disappearing body veiled by clouds, two angels giving instruction to dumbstruck disciples. And, as often is the case, we keenly feel the inadequacy of language to convey mystery.

The Ascension is not just one of the pretty depictions of this in stained glass, the Anglican Cathedral in Brandon had a magnificent example. It's glorious but just imaginative. The reality must have been, as with the disciples, so as to strike one dumb with awe.

Most Importantly, What does the Ascension mean...

It is, of course, the end of Jesus' ministry on earth and the beginning of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in its stead. Jesus is gone.⁴

More than that, "The event is a boundary and a transition." Ascension is a symbol of moving from one sphere of reality to another; to "transcend" is to cross the boundary between realities.

Not surprisingly, we find a lot of evidence in the early writings of Paul about how the first believers were trying to understand what the resurrection and ascension mean for life.⁵

Paul uses this amazing language to describe what happens to people when they pass through this boundary of realities:

For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality – death is swallowed up in victory... (1 Cor 15:53-54)

Here is the 'why' of the Ascension according to Paul in Eph 4:10: ***He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.***

The resurrection and ascension are the vindication of everything. All of it! It is the exaltation.

And speaking of the ***...immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe...*** we find this:

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. (Eph 1:20-21)

And from that Paul makes the astonishing leap to say: ***But God who is rich in mercy...raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*** (Eph 2:8)

That is the gospel for us today.

Recall that the Ascension is enshrined in the Creed. It is a core idea of the Christian faith: *He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the father.*

As with *all* the central tenets of the Creed (which operates as a tightly interconnected whole), to drift away from the Ascension is to abandon an essential idea of our faith.

When we see the line in the Creed: *We look for the resurrection of the dead*, it is to say that 'where He is, so shall we go.' ***...raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.***

We will travel the boundary ourselves. Everything will be complete in its time.⁶

From the Text

By way of applying this to our lives today, let me say two things.

The language of Scripture refers to heaven as “up.” Our passages this morning are replete with up/down language. Jesus himself said, ***Our Father who art in the heavens*** (a plural, *tois ouranois*). For the ancients, God was in the only place they could not go.

But it is a metaphor of course. God isn’t up there. God is everywhere, omnipresent. Which also means that “heaven” is everywhere. Heaven isn’t a place. It is a transcendent reality. If we could see through the veil, heaven is here.

When we say the Ascension Reality, think of your kitchen, your desk at work, your bedside, your garden. The Risen Christ is present with you.

And finally this, (and I’ll ask our musicians to come).

I am a devotee of both reason and science (I started the science program at Ambrose University). Even so, in this day of enlightenment and reason, we are extraordinarily busy making fools of ourselves on the most profound truths of life.

Moderns are constantly relegating the concept of transcendence to the category of mere superstition and religion, we say dismissively.

I have a friend who used to be in the ministry who no longer “believes.” You have never seen someone deflect questions of Christian faith and spirituality more adeptly than this person. The subject will change with breathtaking speed. Know anyone like this? Maybe family members?

That’s fine. Everybody gets to choose what they base their life on. Free will is the cornerstone of God’s relationship to humankind.

But I find it bordering on comic/tragic, this hubris of the human mind; that what *I think* is the be all and end all. That simply because we don’t believe it, it cannot be true.

It doesn’t matter if you believe this is true or not. Nothing *you* believe or *I* believe, changes the Ascension Reality. You may call this special pleading – I call it conviction. Just consider it – God may speak to you!

Do you know where the word “idiot” comes from? The Greek *idios* means “self”, in its nominal form *idiotēs* means the “individual,” one who doesn’t belong to the group. And in Greek culture the highest value was placed on one’s participation as a citizen, one’s responsibility to the whole of society.⁷ The person who *relied solely on their individualism* was... an “*idiotēs*.”

In modern western culture the highest value is placed on individuality. It is this value, for all that is good about it in some ways, is currently plaguing our times, as people refuse to seek the good of the whole of society, indulging in the self.

That self reigns over all. That such an idea as the Ascension, shared by the church since its foundation, means nothing. Such a person is an *idiotēs*. There is more to truth than what I think.

The main idea I want to leave with you for the week to come is this:

Is there anything more profound one could assert about the nature of the Christian life? About life itself... than that we live in the light of the Ascension Reality. It changes the way you view the morning light, filling it with hope of change and the ascendent goodness of God. It makes more meaningful all of our efforts to be better people, to work harder for the common good. It calls us to

walk in humility, eschewing proudness of mind, to humble ourselves before the one exalted above every name.

For God is everywhere always. Our true reality is the Ascension Reality.

Thanks be to God. Amen

¹ Sirach 3:21-22 (Apocrypha) is cited in this regard: ***Neither seek what is too difficult for you, not investigate what is beyond your power. Reflect upon what you have been commanded, for what is hidden is not your concern.***

² Matthew does not mention of the Ascension but says only ...***But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.*** (Matt 26:32)

³ The passage has lots of interesting aspects. There is the prohibition about speculation on the timing of Israel's exaltation (v 7). There is the promise of power (v 8). There is an interesting listing of the original group of leaders, just to be clear. What we call here during the Great Transition, the "lead team." This all happens on the nearby Mt of Olives, a "sabbath day's journey away" from Jerusalem, because you weren't allowed to walk very far on the sabbath.

⁴ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 49. "It completes the cyclic U-shaped life of the incarnate Christ – a descent followed by an ascent.

⁵ An early Christian hymn is found in 1 Timothy 3:16:

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great:

He was revealed in the flesh,

Vindicated in spirit,

Seen by angels,

Proclaimed among the Gentiles,

Believed in throughout the world,

Taken up in glory.

⁶ The reason we talk about adhering to the Creed is because the ideas present in the Creed represents a whole piece of cloth. Its beauty is that it gives us the fullness of essential interrelated ideas. You can't pick and choose and still have it be the Creed to us.

Later this summer I'm doing a four-week series on *Curious Lines of the Creed* to help us more clearly understand what we are saying when we recite the Creed.

⁷From Wikipedia article *Idiot*: "The word "idiot" comes from the [Greek](#) noun ἰδιώτης *idiōtēs* 'a private person, individual' (as opposed to the state), 'a [private citizen](#)' (as opposed to someone with a political office)... Many political commentators, starting as early as 1856, have interpreted the word "idiot" as reflecting the Ancient Athenians' attitudes to civic participation and private life, combining the ancient meaning of 'private citizen' with the modern meaning 'fool' to conclude that the Greeks used the word to say that it is selfish and foolish not to participate in public life..."

Notice the interesting use of the word in 1 Cor 14:23, where we find ***If therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders (ἰδιώτης, idiōtēs) or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind?***