

Angelic Redirection—Ascension of Our Lord Sunday

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[Acts 1:1-11](#)

[Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35](#)

[Ephesians 1:15-23](#)

[Luke 24:44-53](#)

What we've just heard is the absolute end of the Gospel of Luke. The story of who *Jesus* is ends with the risen one leaving his disciples behind with words of encouragement. The Book of Acts, however, written by the same author, begins with the very same event, because it is the story of us, of the Church.

In Acts we have the detail that "As a cloud took Jesus out of their sight... Suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'"

Just as there were messengers at Jesus' birth who had a very important truth to tell about God, and the same is true of the messengers at Jesus' resurrection, this is the third in a series of very important moments telling who Christ is, who God is.

At his birth, when we say God became flesh, then an angel of the Lord stood before the shepherds, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." The messengers, the angels, here at this first touchpoint are giving redirection. Don't be afraid, they shout, you've got it backwards, we're not the enemy!

And the same was true in Luke at the tomb. On the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] went to the tomb, ...they found the stone rolled away... but...they did not find the body. Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them, saying: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen." Once again, a redirection. Jesus told you what was to happen! they say. Why are you here? Rejoice!

So, our story today, what our tradition calls Jesus' Ascension, is the same. Two angelic messengers are redirecting the disciples once again. The disciples even at these last stages still have a lot to learn. They are still wondering, in Acts, when Jesus is going to restore worldly power to their in-group. Which all people can relate to. You know, we might ask when is the church going to be the center of attention again?

Jesus' reply to the disciples is for us too, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." From the Spirit coming down and birthing the Church, from Jerusalem, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth—this is like the table of contents of the Book of Acts, and this exactly is what the story tells of. But at first, the new apostles are just looking up, just like the shepherds were scared of the news from the angels; just like the women were going to the tomb to anoint a dead body. We always can use some redirection.

God becoming flesh is a mystery. This enfleshed one named Jesus rising from the dead is a mystery. Christ ascending is another mystery. These are our defining mysteries. And when our defining, foundational beliefs about God are mysteries, you can't possibly expect to get things perfectly right all the time...

And so, this mysteriousness of Jesus' Ascension, along with all our lessons this morning, brings us to the image of "heaven." Luke & Acts says a cloud took Jesus out of the apostles' sight. The Psalmist of the ancient Hebrew people sings of God as riding clouds, riding in the ancient heavens, sending forth God's mighty voice. Ascribe power to God, the psalmist sings, whose majesty is over Israel; whose strength is in the skies. Paul's letter to the Ephesians summarizes this all, saying: The immeasurable greatness of God's power is put to work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and seated him at God's right hand in the "heavenly places."

But you and I all know that if you go up you encounter a thinning atmosphere for dozens of miles, then freezing temperatures, and you are soon enough in the vacuum of space. What heavens then? Just as God becoming flesh is a mystery, just as Jesus rising from the dead confounds and delights us, let us be mystified by this Ascension too.

The heavens, according to the Psalmist, are the realms of power. God has made all things, they say, even the unmeasurable, inscrutable skies. God dwells there even, out of mortal sight, in the invisible fields of glory. And so, God's eternal Word, was happy to dwell for a time in the man Jesus of Nazareth, and though he does not go down to the land of the dead, he does go away from our sight. That specific person, Jesus of Nazareth, is gone.

Christ, however, always was, always is and always will be. If the ancient heavens, as the Psalmist calls them, are God's holy places, the cosmological location of God's court, God's barbershop, all in a poetic manner of speaking—then in that same poetic flourish, Christ, God's Word, is at God's right hand there. I think we're all familiar with the expression of being someone's right hand person. This one has all the same information, all the authority, all the same power. If Christ is the image of God physically present to us—Christ fully present in the

fragility of a human baby; Christ fully present beyond the threshold of death; then Christ, at the "right hand" of God is fully present *in all things and for all time*.

So, as I pontificate about theology up here, it's all a bit over *our heads* you could say.... Now would be an appropriate time for the angels to come to us and say: "People of Hamden, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" The redirection in Acts is this: **Be down to earth!** "He is not up there, he's everywhere. He's not only in Jerusalem, he's not only in Samaria, he's in all the ends of the earth. He's here now. Don't look in the tombs, don't look in the heavens!"

Look at the world—the beautiful, suffering, complicated world.

But our knowing this mystery, our trusting this mystery, is not something we can work ourselves up to. As Connell comes to the water of baptism today, he is the latest heir to these mysteries of God's uncontainable life. And just as he comes innocent, unknowing and whole to the water, So, do we all, even now, come to these mysteries unknowing but whole.

"See, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so, stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high," Jesus says in Luke.

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you," says Jesus in the Book of Acts.

St. Paul prays, "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you."

I think we often forget that in the imagination of the people from the ancient near east... clouds were a big deal. Clouds bring... rain, water. And water is life.

Jesus is taken from our sight by vehicles of life, by clouds. And as the Psalmist says: "O God, when you went forth before your people,/when you marched through the wilderness,/ the earth quaked, and the skies poured down rain, at the presence of God, the God of Sinai,/ at the presence of God, the God of Israel./ You sent a bountiful rain, O God; / you restored your inheritance when it languished.

And just like Connell, we all have come to God's waters. God's waters that are infused, we believe, with God's Spirit of merciful presence, and trustworthy mystery.

Amen.