

“A New Perspective”
May 16, 2021

Ephesians 2:1-10
Acts 1:1-11

The puzzling account of the ascension of Jesus is traditionally read on this last Sunday of the Easter season, the Sunday before Pentecost. In the timetable of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, the Ascension occurred forty days after Easter, so Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday, ten days before Pentecost. But even in the best of circumstances, Congregationalists aren't going to get together in the middle of the week to mark this event, so we recognize it today instead.

And we do so with some, what—reluctance, embarrassment?

While we still talk about the sun “rising” and “setting,” even though we know that's not what's happening, accounts of going “up to heaven” can make us squirm. Maybe you agree with Paul Tillich when he said of the Ascension: “If taken literally, its spatial symbolism would become absurd.”

Turning from an easy literalism, then, we discover a surprising number of ways in which this story can help us in these days.

We can begin with its sense of finality. Something is ending here.

The Gospels of John and Matthew and Luke and the testimony of Paul tell us that after the resurrection there were several times in which the risen Christ appeared to his followers.

Resurrection changes everything. Christ is alive—and that changes how we look at death. The final enemy is defeated, the destroyer has been destroyed. And because resurrection changes how we look at death, it changes how we look at life.

Resurrection quietly tells us that what's dead is dead. But it also shouts loud enough that we might hear that something more wonderful than we have ever imagined is coming to life.

And yet, we know that the resurrected Christ does not continue to appear. With the ascension, appearance comes to an end.

We are told by some that we have entered an “end times” of sorts: that in the United States the pandemic is coming to an end, winding down. If you are vaccinated, take off your masks, the CDC now says. At the same time, we are told that these days will not be over until children are vaccinated along with adults.

Even the “end” doesn't seem to be the “end.” There is little finality in our changing world and changing circumstances.

But we do find ourselves in a condition similar to that of the early followers of Jesus in this way: seeking to understand on a daily basis what it means to be the church *without* Jesus. We find ourselves looking around, looking up, looking in some direction for some direction.

What we need is a new perspective, fresh ways of seeing.

So listen again to that account from Acts:

“When Jesus had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he 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? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’”

I heard something new in this story this year. This account is filled with words and phrases about what is seen and what is not seen: watching, out of their sight, gazing up, looking up, saw.

This is a story of new vision, new sight, new perspective. The problem is that the label “Ascension Day” skews how and where we look. We start looking up just when we should be looking around. Our opening hymn this morning reminds us:

Lord, how your wonders are displayed,
where'er we turn our eyes,
if we survey the ground we tread
or gaze upon the skies.

The resurrection keeps bringing us back to here and now. Our eyes are not on the heavens but on earth.

Our own sightlines are changing.

For over a year now we have looked at one another as we have appeared together in the Brady Bunch boxes of Zoom meetings. That's meant that we could see people from all over the country, indeed all over the world. I like that. We have worshipped by watching a few lone figures on a computer or TV screen. Through our online worship, however, we've reached new people—and that, too, is good, although it will be an occasion of great joy when this space is filled once more.

There has also been isolation when we have needed connection. People have looked at loved ones in hospitals and nursing homes through windows in doors.

Now the masks are coming off. Some are quick to remove them, others a little more cautious—we all have our own timetables for this and that's OK. Distances are being bridged. For many, Mother's Day was the first time in over a year that families were reunited.

We look around at spring as the world turns green once more.

We look around at each other.

And this is what these days now offer: a chance to look around, to see what has changed and what has remained the same; a chance to see what needs to be changed and what doesn't. These are days to find a new perspective, to look at our lives and this world from new vantage points.

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians puts us in the heavenly places already, exalted along with the risen Christ. Christ is ascended—and so are we! This, of course, is not where we usually find ourselves—but by faith we might imagine ourselves looking at the world and one another from such a position. And what might we see if we were to look on this world in such a way?

God still cares for this world that God created and called good.

God does care about our incredibly difficult and surprisingly joyful lives.

God does care about these incredibly hard and stress-filled lives that we live.

God notices these lives of pain and joy all tumbled together in ways we could never have imagined.

This same God is doing new things within us and among us and around us and through us.

If we take our theology to heart, it informs our actions. The power of the Spirit of God, the energy for life, is the ability to confront the principalities and powers of this world, to speak God's "Yes" which can sound like a judging "No" to greed, to hoarding, to fear, but which is also a resounding affirmation of the goodness of life, the strength of love, and the possibility of justice and reconciliation.

This "Yes" is the message of Easter and therefore the message of this day as well.

Jesus no longer with us is—somehow—Christ powerfully present for us at all times.

Flying a kite is a traditional activity to celebrate the ascension. Think about holding that spool of string in your hand as your kite soars into the air. Higher and higher it goes, tugging, pulling. Tension makes the kite fly. Still here on solid ground, we are connected to something high above and beyond us.

Kite flying hints at the meaning of the ascension. As human beings, we make our home on the earth. But there is something beyond what we can see, something beyond what we can touch.

Jesus ascends to heaven—we don't talk like that much anymore. The words might fail us, but beyond the words we can get some sense of what they are trying to express. Because Jesus is no longer on earth, his power is unleashed to transform us and all creation.