

A DISTANT PRESENCE

(5/16/10)

Scripture Lesson: Acts 1:1-11
Luke 24:44-53

“When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” (Acts 1:9)

This Easter season, the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost, we have been thinking about the theme of death, a theme that naturally leads into reflections on life after death. The gospel narratives describe several post-resurrection encounters, several times that the disciples experienced Jesus following his death and resurrection.

One question that arises from the disciples’ descriptions of their risen Lord is whether Jesus was in what we would call “heaven” when they encountered him. As one of the participants in our Spiritual Study and Growth Group has suggested, the point might be not whether Jesus was in heaven at the time of the encounter but whether the disciples were in heaven or in the kingdom of God when they suddenly discovered that they were in the presence of their risen Lord. The disciples may have been able to see and even touch Jesus because they were able to see deeper, because they could tap into the dimension or realm of eternity, the realm where Jesus always is.

Three of the four gospels conclude with a description of how Jesus left his disciples, left this earth, and ascended to heaven. They state that he actually went up into the air. Since this past Thursday, May 13, was Ascension Day, and since we didn’t do it up big this year as a church, I thought we might take a few minutes this morning to explore this important doctrine.

We should begin by noting that the synoptic gospels are not in total agreement with regard to the ascension and it is not mentioned at all in the Gospel of John.

The Gospel of Mark has two endings, commonly called the shorter and the longer endings. The shorter makes no mention of Jesus’ ascension. In fact, there is no mention of a post-resurrection meeting with his disciples. A young man, presumably an

angel, tells the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is going before them to Galilee and that they will see him there. This ending concludes with the following:

And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them [the disciples], from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

The so-called longer ending contains a description of the ascension. In it we read,

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them [the disciples] was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

So Jesus is both in heaven, seated at the right hand of God, and also here on earth, working with the disciples and confirming their proclamation of the Kingdom of God by miracles and signs. He is both distant and present.

In the Gospel of Matthew there is no mention of Jesus' ascension. Following his resurrection when Jesus meets the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, he says to them,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Note that Jesus does not leave them. He does not ascend or go to heaven. Rather he promises to be with them always, even to the end of the age.

The passage we heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke contains a description of the ascension. It says,

Then Jesus led his disciples out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

This passage suggests that Jesus "withdrew" from the disciples into heaven. There is no promise that he will continue to be with them, only that they will be "clothed with power from on high," which I take to mean that they will receive the Holy Spirit.

These accounts, though they differ, suggest that following his resurrection Jesus is both transcendent, separate from us, dwelling in a place we might call heaven, and also immanent, with us, right here on earth, closer to us than we are to ourselves. The disciples realize that although Jesus left them, he did not leave them. Although Jesus is in heaven with God, he is also here on earth.

There are five parts to the Easter story. The first is Jesus' crucifixion. The second is the resurrection, what happened to Jesus' spirit and body the night following his burial. The third is the post-resurrection experiences, the disciples' encounters with the risen Christ at the tomb, in the upper room, by the lake, and on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus' ascension, his departure from earth and entry into heaven, is the fourth dimension. The doctrine of the ascension is included in the Apostles' Creed, which we will read this morning as our affirmation of faith. According to the book of Acts, this event happened forty days after Easter. As we know, the number forty is significant; it appears time and again in scripture. In Acts and the gospel of Luke, which were written by the same author, the ascension marks the end of the post-resurrection experiences.

In some of his post-resurrection encounters Jesus appears in human form. He allows Thomas to touch the nail holes in his hands and the spear wound in his side. He breaks bread with two disciples after they travel together on the road to Emmaus, and he eats breakfast with seven others beside the Sea of Tiberias.

In other post-resurrection encounters, Jesus seems to be more spirit than flesh. He appears in the midst of the disciples even though the doors of the room are closed and locked. He vanishes from their midst following their recognition of him in the upper room, on the road to Emmaus, and by the lake. In his encounter with Mary by the tomb, Jesus asks her not to touch him since he has "not yet ascended to the Father." This implies that Mary could have touched him but, for some reason, she should not.

As we think about our loved ones who have passed away, we do so in light of our belief in the power of the resurrection. We know our loved ones are alive in our hearts and in our memories. We trust they are alive in some way in the presence of God. As I suggested two weeks ago, however, they may also be with us as a living presence, a presence that can only be sensed through the connecting power of love.

In the account of the ascension in the book of Acts, which was written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, Jesus goes up into the air. Scripture tells us he was “lifted up” or “carried up” into heaven. I’m not sure we have to take the expression “up” literally, though we instinctively raise our eyes to heaven when we pray. In Jesus’ time, when people believed in a flat earth and a three-storied universe, they pictured heaven up in the sky and hell under the ground. In fact, the two men in white robes who suddenly appear beside the disciples at the tomb ask them, “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.”

With regard to this morning’s gospel reading, the footnote in our Bible indicates that there were two different descriptions of the ascension in the ancient texts. In one, Jesus simply parts, departs, or withdraws from his disciples. In the other, he departs from them and rises up to heaven. The first implies that he just separates himself from his disciples. The second implies that he ascends to heaven. So which was it?

As I have mentioned before, I think our language may be the problem. When human beings became conscious, they began to split their experience of the world into opposites: up and down, left and right, light and dark, good and bad, God and humanity, heaven and earth, life and death. This is how our mind and our language structure reality, but it may not be how reality is. Reality may not be separated into the neat little categories that our language, our description of reality, implies.

Think of the dichotomy of mind and body. We think of them as separate and speak of them as separate, but are they separate? We can’t have mind without body. If

we maintain their separate existence, we create a conundrum. On one side the Christian Scientists maintain that mind is the only reality, that physical matter is an illusion, and that prayer is the only effective response to illness. On the other side are the materialists who believe that everything is reducible to body, that the mind is nothing more than the brain. Their approach to healing is chemical. They do not believe in psychosomatic medicine, though we know from our own experience that our psychological condition can give rise to an ulcer or headache, and that a chemical imbalance in our body or brain can affect our mind.

When we dichotomize, we invariably place a value judgment on the polarities. The belief that spirit is good and flesh is bad has led to asceticism, the punishment of the body as a path to spiritual enlightenment. The belief that heaven is good and earth is bad, evil, and fallen has kept us from embracing the wonder of God's creation. When we split the races into white people and black people, why can't we just notice the difference? Why do we have to say white is good and black is bad?

When Jesus ascends to heaven, it is possible that he doesn't go to a place. Through his ascension he ushers us into a different reality, a different grasp of reality. As we know from the post-resurrection appearances, he is both spirit and flesh. He can walk through walls, yet he eats fish. He is in heaven, yet he is on earth with us. He is no longer present, except to those who love him. To these people, his disciples, he is very present.

I believe that Jesus overcomes death by dissolving the dichotomy between life and death, earth and heaven, this side of the grave and the other. This is why I find it sad when I hear some people say that they can't wait until they die so they can be with God. I think it is very possible that when we die we will be in heaven with God. It is also possible that we are with God right now because heaven is right here on earth, though we may not know it.

You may remember the popular ballad, "God is Watching Us From a Distance." When I first heard the song, I liked its message. It reminds us that if we look at things from a higher perspective, from God's perspective, many of the boundaries and distinctions that divide us, that lead to prejudice and war do not appear.

However, there is one part of this song that troubles me. It is the suggestion that God is watching us -- from a distance. It pictures God as a detached observer, apart from the world he created. The message of the gospel is that God is present with us and within us. The image of God dwelling somewhere millions of miles distant from earth and shaking his head in disapproval at what we are doing to each other, is not the way I picture God or God's presence in the unfolding of our lives.

The ascension, like the virgin birth, which is also mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, may have happened literally. Like the virgin birth, the ascension may also be a symbolic expression of a deeper truth. This would explain why the accounts are so paradoxical. The deeper message of the virgin birth is that Jesus is both human and divine. The deeper meaning of the ascension is that Jesus is both in heaven and here on earth. He is distant, yet present. He is with God and with us. This means that we are with him and with God.

The great cathedrals of Europe were built during the Middle Ages, when most of the people who attended church were illiterate. Those who constructed these massive edifices took great pains to teach the faith through art. If you walk through Notre Dame in Paris, you will find the entire story of Jesus' life depicted in sculpture and painting. Even if you couldn't read, you could connect the scripture readings you heard on Sunday morning with the pictures. This would imprint it in your mind.

The cathedral in York, England contains an interesting painting. In one of the side chapels, an unknown craftsman created a testimony to the ascension. On the ceiling at the top of the archway is a painting showing eleven faces gathered in a circle. They are the Twelve, minus Judas Iscariot, who are with Jesus as he departs into

heaven. At the very center of the painting is a pair of feet -- all that would be seen by the disciples as Jesus is lifted up or ascends to heaven.

Is this literally the way it happened -- that Jesus simply rose into the air and faded away into the clouds? Or was this an attempt to depict a deeper truth about heaven and earth, this life and the next, in a picture? No matter what you believe, there is no doubt that the disciples experienced Jesus as both in heaven and on earth, as what we might call a distant presence.

For those of us who have lost loved ones, let us think of our loved ones who have died as living on not only in our memories but also in the mysterious realm of God. Let us consider the possibility that they are still alive, just in another realm, and that they can be present to us in a very real way, just as Jesus was to his disciples. My prayer for us is that in relation to our Lord and our loved ones who have passed away, we, like the disciples, will experience the comforting message of the ascension – the deeply comforting sense of a distant presence.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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