

When he 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." Acts 1: 9-11

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, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. Ephesians 1: 20-23

Then he led them 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. Luke 24: 50-51

JESUS ASCENDS TO BE FULLY WITH US

The texts that Fiona read this morning about the ascension of Jesus offer a wealth of metaphors and images; speaking loudly of God's work in and among us. It is true that there are contradictions in Luke's two accounts – he is looking at the same experience from two points of view. In the gospel message the ascension is a conclusion – a dramatic finale to Jesus' earthly ministry. In Acts it is the beginning premise on which the church is based. The end becomes the beginning as the story continues and the two texts together present the drama of Jesus, who departs, directs the disciples, and promises to return. They inspire deep challenge and extravagant joy, calling us to be mindful again of the Christ who is exalted and transcendent, and of the coming Holy Spirit who dwells within us and in whom we live and move and have our being.

Some of us spent time in the realm of images and metaphor earlier this week as we began our prayer study. The author, Philip Yancey, encouraged us to grasp the idea of *The God's Eye View*. He took us to the top of a Colorado mountain and displayed the very picture that ascension conjures: grandeur, power, mystery and majesty. He also reminded us how small we may seem in the whole scheme of things. We are perhaps focused on the insignificant – trifles – the mundane bits and pieces of our world and our lives. As we engage in our relationship with God we need to adjust our perspective – to refrain from so much navel gazing and instead look out – look to the splendor of the heavens and think about what it means that Jesus was carried up, and apparently away, from his disciples.

What does it mean to say Jesus ascended into heaven? What does **up** mean and where is heaven in the cosmos as our telescopes have revealed it? At first glance, this language seems at odds with our enlightened understanding of the universe. No longer do we have a three layer, hamburger universe, consisting of heaven, earth, and hell. In that view of the universe, **up to heaven** made sense, and **down to hell** made sense. These days we know about an immense cosmos, of billions of suns and planets, all expanding and developing from one mighty moment of creation.

The word **up** is a relative word on a spherical planet set in this immense cosmos. Ascending – going up – implies a very different direction according to where one is standing on the face of the globe. **Up** when standing in Galilee is a very different perspective from that when one stands atop Mount Doug on a Sunday morning. Words like **carried up** and **ascension** are perhaps not very helpful ones these days.

Some have substituted the word **beyond**, but that also has problems. Beyond what? Beyond this cosmos? That puts God and heaven and Jesus, who is at God's right hand, far away from us. We don't believe that, do we? The word **beyond** – like the word **above** – cannot be allowed to suggest a God who is remote or disinterested in day-to-day needs, hopes, and despairs.

Instead of thinking about synonyms for the word **up** we need to realize that **up** and **ascension** are metaphors for the exalted position of Christ crucified in the same way that the author of Ephesians seats Christ at the right hand of God – being at the king's right hand is a symbolic position of authority and might. The picture of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God conveys the closeness of the risen Jesus to God, and the authority that Jesus' life and teaching command. He is above all others, close to the heart of God, bearing God's authority.

Metaphor always involves an element of contradiction because we use it to help us describe one thing in terms of another – attending to the thread of similarity between two dissimilar things and using that which is better known to speak about the lesser known. [Sallie McFague] There is paradox in the use of metaphor – it always has elements of what is and what is not in the comparison. In our readings from Luke and Acts today Christ's exaltation is proclaimed and for all the power and glory that exaltation entails, it also implies distance and otherness. We affirm that Jesus went up and away from his friends so that he might be always with them. He did not go far above them or far beyond them, but nearer to them. So today we celebrate and praise the awesomeness of the risen Christ at the same time as we identify with the disciples gazing into the heavens with a sense of loss to counter the wonder and the worship.

Often we are able to confidently rejoice in the truth that Jesus, our Saviour, guide and friend, is now eternally and universally close to us – that Jesus has moved from the time-bound to the timeless – from spatial limitation to unlimited availability – from earthly shadows to eternal light – *closer than our breathing, and nearer than hands or feet*. Yet we are just as aware that there are times when we have experienced divine silence or distance. Our perspective on how close we feel God to be is about us – about our circumstances or our state of mind – not God's. We see things from different points of view at different moments in our lives – sometimes there are dark nights of the soul when divine absence overwhelms us and it is difficult to embrace the truth that Jesus went away so that he might be fully with us.

It might be less confusing to focus on the **cloud** rather than Jesus going **up**. Luke, both in his gospel and in the book of Acts, speaks of Jesus being gathered into a cloud – *and a cloud took him out of their sight*. In Biblical images, the cloud represents the intimate, divinity of God. The cloud that carries Jesus away is the power and presence

of God – a powerful metaphor for God that reminds us of other metaphors – other encounters. God is present with Moses at Mount Sinai in a cloud that covers the mountain, and again when Moses meets with God in a *tent of meeting* where a *pillar of cloud* covers the tent or stands at its entrance. The pillar of cloud leads the people of Israel out of captivity. It is from a cloud that God's voice speaks in the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain when Jesus' face – like Moses' face – changes while praying. That day a cloud overshadowed Jesus and the apostles, and they went into the cloud. God spoke from inside the cloud. When Luke mentions the cloud, it represents Jesus being gathered into the eternal presence of God – available to everyone, everywhere, all the time.

Jesus was humble and misunderstood, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. He chose to seem weak by taking the path of forgiveness and non-violence. He was hungry and thirsty and begged a drink from a despised Samaritan woman. He was hounded by powerful enemies yet raised no hand against them. He blessed children, blasted hypocrites, touched lepers, spent nights alone in the open, found truth in wild lilies and sparrows, claimed that God was astoundingly generous and could be absolutely trusted. He was betrayed, arrested, denied, abused, tried by a kangaroo court and killed in the cruelest way. He died and was buried in a borrowed tomb. It is Jesus, only this person, Christ Jesus, who is risen and exalted at God's right hand. His love, his mercy, his joy, his peace, his meekness, his quiet yet tenacious strength – all these have the stamp of God's authority on them. When we use the metaphor of sitting at the right hand of God, we affirm the teaching and example as well as the divinity of Jesus.

To trust Christ Jesus – to love and follow the teaching and example he offers is to embark upon a journey of intimate relationship. To trust Christ Jesus and live in the belief that he is closer than our breathing is to connect with those on the margins, to touch people who are struggling, to make contact in seemingly small ways. In Christ Jesus, God reaches out to us in our day-to-day needs, hopes and despairs. Today as we look up to heaven and see Jesus gathered into the clouds, we see Jesus come close to us in a new and radical way. As we look to heaven, we behold the face of God in those to whom we offer our blessings – those for whom we pray – those we are privileged to comfort.

Celebrate the truth revealed in today's texts – images that glorify Jesus over all creation – truly divine – yet closer to us than we ever thought possible. Behold the grandeur, power, majesty and mystery of participating in relationship with the risen Christ. Gaze into the mystery of heaven, which overlaps, under lays, and interleaves, our earthly life – beyond and within – all around us, now and always. **Amen.**

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2008