

HE IS RISEN TO THE HEAVENS ABOVE
A Sermon for the Feast Of The Ascension, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

On Easter morning, our glad cry is “He is risen!, He is risen!, Alleluia, He is risen. Today, on the Feast of the Ascension, we can say, “He is risen!, He is risen!, Now, He is risen to the Heavens above.”

The last act of Jesus Christ on this earth was to leave this earth in clouds of glory. Along the line of what Julius Caesar said of, “I came, I saw, I conquered.”; someone once encapsulated Jesus’ life by writing “He was born, He died, He rose, He ascended.” That gets the gist of the four most important events of His life, but it certainly leaves a lot of blanks to be filled in of many other events that, although they are of lesser importance, they are still very important. And even if we do fill in those blanks, we would not have begun to talk about the meaning of any of those events; but let’s do that anyway.

In between His Birth and His Death: He was circumcised, He was visited by Gentiles at the Epiphany, He grew up, He was baptized, and He had three years of ministry. Each of these five “events” has theological significance in regard to our understanding of Christ. In fact, it is the Gospel record of His ministry that is our major guide to the path He wants us to walk. Between His Death and His Resurrection, we don’t have a lot to go on. There are four passages that when looked at together, provide the basis for the statement in the Apostles Creed, “He descended into Hell”, where Hell really means Hades, the place of departed spirits. One of those is Acts 2:27 from St. Peter’s Sermon, where he says: [27 Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.](#) Then, there is this passage in 1 Peter 3:18-19 [18 For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: 19 By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison;](#) Many interpret this to mean that Christ preached to the souls of all who had not had a chance to hear the Gospel before His Crucifixion, both Jews and Gentiles, for all the time since Adam.

As for the time between the Resurrection and the Ascension, we do have a good scriptural account of Christ’s appearances to the Apostles and other disciples, and we know how important that period was in preparing them for the Pentecost and the Ascension. The thing is, that until,

and even on, the Day of Pentecost, they never really seem to be fully prepared, as if anyone could be fully prepared for that.

But now we have come to the Day of the Ascension. The last few verses of each of the Gospels tells us something different. That should no longer bother us. Each of the evangelists almost always tells us something a little different even when he is telling us the same story that another has told us. That way we get more of the whole story.

At the end of the Gospel of St. Matthew, we are told of something that happened on a mountain top in Galilee. That could not have been on the Day of the Ascension because all the other accounts put the Ascension as taking place in Bethany or on the Mount of Olives which is just northeast of Bethany. St. Matthew tells us that Jesus says He has received all power and authority in heaven and on earth, and then He pronounces the Great Commission. A slightly different version of the Great Commission is given in the description of the Ascension in Acts 1.

St. Mark gives us a Calvin Coolidge condensed version of both the Great Commission and the Ascension, one verse for each: the Great Commission in Mark 16:15 15 And he said unto them, **“Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”** and the Ascension in Mark 16:19 19 **“So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.”**

St. Luke gives us our Gospel lesson for this evening in which he gives us a slightly longer version of the Ascension than St. Mark does, saving his long version for the Book of Acts. Our Gospel lesson begins at verse 49, and we should note that St. Luke also gives us the Great Commission in verse 47.

St. John, of course, does not bother to tell us of either the Great Commission or of the Ascension; but ends his Gospel with the story of the breakfast on the beach, which none of the other three tells us. Each evangelist told us things he thought were important, and it seems that none of what they told us is unimportant. However John quotes Jesus as prophesying the Ascension in a backhanded way when Jesus said to the Jews in the Bread of Life discourse in John 6:61-62 **“Do you take offense at this? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”**

However, St. Luke Gives us the most detailed description of the Ascension in the Book of Acts. Let’s hear that again beginning at verse 6 of Acts 1.

Acts 1:6-11 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." 9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

“He was lifted up and a cloud took Him out of sight.” How many times in the Bible do we read of clouds when God is present? In Exodus and from then on. The theologian Meredith Kline calls this the Glory Cloud, in his book, *Images of the Spirit*. The cloud is formed by the Holy Spirit to shield humans from the glory of the face of the Father. The cloud is also associated with the sound of wind or rushing water, just as that sort of sound was heard on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples.

Where did the cloud take Him? In Ephesians 4, in verses just after the passage on the front of the Service Bulletin, St. Paul Tells us this:

Ephesians 4:7-10 7 But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." 9 (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) Far above all the heavens! and where might that be? Perhaps it is true that the throne room of God is higher than all the heavens. In two different places we are told directly where Christ is: In Colossians 3:1 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. and in 1 Peter 3:21-22 Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. In Hebrews 10:12 we are also told where Jesus now is: 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

When we put all this together, Jesus is the Son of Man, and the Son of God; and he has been taken up and is seated at the right hand of the Father, just as we say in the Creeds.

So what does the Ascension do for us? Why Should we celebrate it as one of the Great feasts of the church? Because it is one of the many crowns of Christ's life on earth. Isaiah prophesies in Isaiah 7:14 **14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.** and then in Isaiah 9:6 **6 For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.** And those prophecies were fulfilled, but few believed. Then, when He grew up and became a great preacher and healer, He prophesied to the disciples Mark 10:33-34 **Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: 34 And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again.**; and they did not believe Him; but it came to pass. After he had risen, they finally believed, really believed; but they had forgotten what he had said about **“ascending to where he was before”**. And so when He was gone up in the cloud, they stood gaping until the angel told them He would return in the same way.

What the Ascension does is it puts a capstone on the story of the life and meaning of Jesus Christ; All the prophecies about Jesus were fulfilled except one. It is all true and we have the stories of a great number of witnesses. There is but one prophecy left unfulfilled: that He will return, ... O, and in the same way that he left. To be ready for that, we much live our lives in the way He would have us live, in keeping His commandments.

AMEN.