

Ascended into Heaven: Acts 1:1-11

By Carl L. Schenck

Today is one of those relatively obscure Christian holidays of which many are unaware: Ascension Sunday. This is the day in the church calendar when we celebrate the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven.

In all honesty, the ascension is a rather difficult idea for the modern mind to handle. It's the story of how Jesus went to the Mount of Olives after his resurrection from the dead. There, according to the book of Acts, Jesus literally flew off into heaven. "He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9).

In the first century, the understanding of the cosmos was very different from ours. People understood heaven to be a place that was literally, geographically, "up" from the earth. They could visualize Jesus leaving them and going "up" into heaven. With our scientific view of the cosmos, we know there is no up or down in the universe. Even our notion of heaven is not of a geographical location or direction. When contemporary people think of the ascension, it is a little hard to imagine the

Lord Jesus Christ flying off like a one-person space shuttle into the skies.

Yet, despite our scientific reservations, the story of the ascension is spiritually important to us. The ascension was the church's way of dealing with a fundamental fact. The earliest disciples had experienced the bodily presence of the risen Lord, the one who was no longer under the claim of death. After a passage of time, this experience of the risen Lord as bodily present with them seemed to pass. He didn't appear again. They accounted for his absence by saying that the risen Lord was now in heaven. They had to go forward without his physical presence. He had ascended into heaven.

Christians today have the same circumstance. We believe in a risen Lord who is no longer physically present. The body of Jesus is not here any longer, except in the church as the body of Christ. So on Ascension Sunday, we do well to think about what Jesus' physical absence means for Christians today.

First, the absence of the physical Jesus calls us to take seriously the church as the body of Christ. This is a concept with which we all are very familiar. We say that the church is the

body of Christ without thinking about what that might actually mean. If the church is the body of Christ, then we are called to give to the church the devotion and respect that Christ deserves.

How precious is the church to us? How central to our lives is the mission of the church? It is easy for us to think that we would respond to the physical presence of Jesus with all the love and devotion we could humanly summon. Yet we often treat the church as just one more volunteer community organization. Now civic clubs do good work; health-related charities appeal to us, especially if we have lost a loved one to the disease the charity seeks to overcome; organizations that support our schools do important work. But none of these organizations are the body of Christ. Only the church is Jesus among us. Its mission is to be consistent with Jesus' mission. The love we have for it is the love we have for Jesus.

The church is the closest we will ever come on earth to having Jesus to care for and to love. On Ascension Sunday, we are called to reassess our devotion to the church as the physical body of Christ still among us. The risen Lord is not here; he has

ascended. The body of Christ is very much here, and the way we treat the church is the way we treat the risen Lord.

Second, Ascension Sunday reminds us that we are each, individually, a part of Christ's body. To honor the church as we honor Christ is also to remember that in a powerful way, we are each a part of this body of Christ. When we neglect our part in the mission of the church, we disable the body of Christ. As Paul said, each of us is a physical part of the body of Christ. We are the arms and legs, the eyes and ears; we are limbs and organs of Christ's present body. When we fail to do our part, the body becomes disabled. Christ becomes disabled. (See 1 Corinthians 12.)

The absence of the physical body of Jesus places a claim upon us to relate to the church as we would relate to Christ. It also reminds us that without our individual faithfulness to our role in the church, the body of Christ is weakened and disabled.

Last, Ascension Sunday reminds us that if Christ's work is to continue, it is up to us to do it. Now that is not to say we receive no godly help. Next Sunday is Pentecost, and we will

celebrate our empowerment by the Holy Spirit. But this divine help comes to empower us in doing the work of Christ.

Jesus is no longer here to heal the sick. He is no longer here to touch the outcast. He is no longer here to feed the hungry.

It is up to us, the body of Christ, to continue this work. If the church fails to be the body of Christ, Jesus is absent. If the church fails to be the body of Christ, Jesus is nowhere to be seen.

Yes, this is an obscure Christian holiday. It celebrates an event that is difficult for the modern scientific mind to take literally. At the same time, this is a critical day in our personal and collective self-understanding. It is significant that the risen Lord ascended into heaven. His ascension invites us to relate to the church as we would to Christ. It reminds each of us of the critical nature of our role in the body of Christ. It calls us to take up Jesus' work on earth. This is a most important obscure day.

Let us pray...

Risen and ascended Christ,

you surround us with witnesses

and send us the Counselor

who opens our minds to understand your teaching.

Bless us with such grace

that our lives may become a blessing for the world

now, and in the age to come. Amen.

(prayer from Vanderbilt Divinity Library)