

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

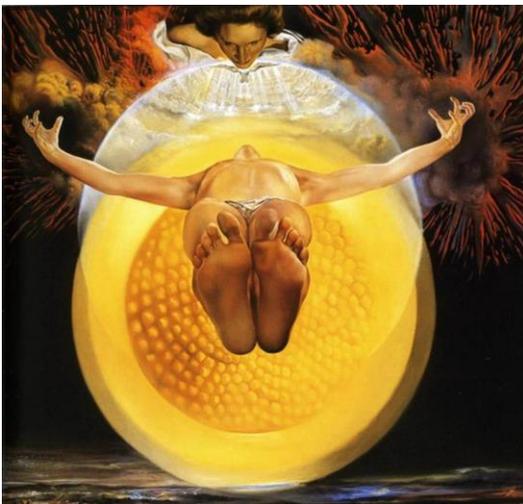
While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

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.

We’ve been hearing lots of late about those who’ve been lifted up and taken away, passing on to the hereafter. Celebrities have been topping the list. There was David Bowie, Alan Rickman, Gary Shandling and just last week, Prince. Fortunately, this is not where the Bible is taking us in this passage. We’ll stay earth bound today.



Today’s scripture passage might at first sound like it’s all about a heavenly departure, but the more you work with this passage (or let it work with you) the more you find that the Ascension of Jesus is a confirmation of who we all are as children of God; an affirmation of God’s love in a way that holds meaning for us each and every day.

Ascension Day is one of the few holy days that the world has not attempted to hijack for commercial purposes.

You don’t see any window displays at J. Crew or American Eagle, or Eddie’s for that matter, celebrating Ascension Day the way it happens with Christmas, Easter or Mother’s

Day.

Nobody pays any attention to Ascension Day except our Roman Catholic and a few Episcopal friends. But it is part of our vocabulary. You may recall that on the Sundays when we recite the Apostles' Creed, among the phrases of our affirmation is that "[Jesus Christ] ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty..." We say it often, but what do we mean by it?

Because today is both Christian Education & Confirmation Sunday, it is a fitting time to explore this- briefly. In the Bible, this is not the first time this sort of thing has happened.

Luke, the author of Acts, draws common Biblical themes together to help us grasp what is going on in this scene. In the Old Testament, in 2 Kings, the prophet Elijah



ascended bodily up to heaven in a whirlwind that had the fingerprints of God all over it. In Moses' day, God was always showing up in a cloud, on the mountainside, leading Israel by day in the wilderness, enveloping Moses on Sinai. The story continues in the New Testament.

If you were to look at the story of Jesus portrayed as drama or theater, what it needs most is a conclusion. We're left after the resurrection wondering, "So what happened to the body?"

Jesus was raised from the tomb and then snapshots of resurrection appearances start to happen. Jesus appears and speaks to Mary; calls her by name, and tells her not to touch him because he has not ascended to heaven. He appears to the disciples in a closed room and later invites Thomas to touch the nail prints in his hand and the wound in his side. He walks the Emmaus Road with two travelers and is made known to them when he explains the scriptures and breaks bread with them. Then he gives fishing tips to the disciples on where to cast their nets and joins them in a fish fry for breakfast.

So on the one hand we have a sense about where Jesus is... If he's not in the tomb, then we might meet him, somehow, on our life's journey, perhaps at a meal, deep in conversation with a new found friend. Jesus only arrives among us after he has already departed; and how in the world does that take place? – which gets us right back to where we started; the real meaning of the Ascension....



A summary of it all goes like this: Because one of us has been raised from the dead, we know that resurrection can and will happen. Because Jesus is one of us- fully human, we know that God loves us fully, and never lets us go. The Ascension of Jesus is a confirmation of who we all are as children of God, each and every one of us.

Jesus was sent from the very heart of God to be a connecting link for us; even as our hopes and prayers ascend to God. Jesus continues to connect us to God - and to each other.

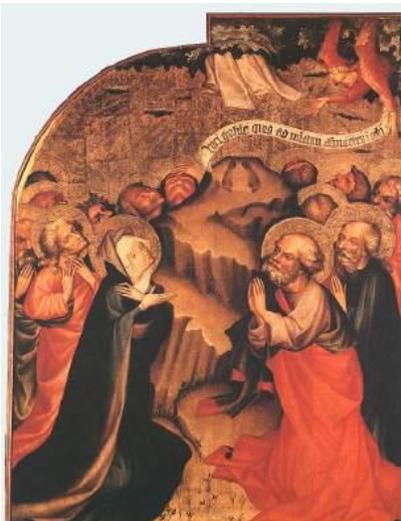
Last Sunday afternoon the confirmands, their mentors and members of our Session met together and in our conversation we heard that they have felt a special attraction to the Lord's Supper, which makes complete sense. Coming to the Lord's Table is a concrete way for us to connect who Jesus is with us & how we share together...

In some ways, the Ascension is the answer to a question that we are often unknowingly asking... How is God connecting with us, now that we no longer see Jesus?

The Lords' Supper is surely special, and some times are particularly memorable and special. While we no longer pair Confirmation Sunday with 'first Communion', that doesn't make this service any less special.

Whenever we have communion, I can't help but think of another way we use this word in the church, as in the "Communion of the Saints", and what that means for us today.

When I think about my own confirmation, in 1969, I think about who was there and who is no longer around; those who are now part of the Communion of Saints, in heaven. There are many of us (most of us?) who won't be around in another 47 years, but you



will be! (CONFIRMANDS!) So you are the ones to be commissioned/ confirmed today as part of the newest flock of the Communion of Saints- the gathered faithful in Jesus' name.

And while the rest of us will be around (for some time yet, I think), we have the job of sharing the work and

witness that Jesus has passed along to us. It's the job Christians have always had, and always will; being witness to Jesus' love in our lives to others.

It's the charge that the risen Lord gives to all his disciples. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

As the first disciples gazed into heaven as Jesus departed from them, two men in white robes said to them, "What are you doing here looking up into the sky (or words to that effect)." "Let's get on with it," (or implications to that effect).

In other words, there's work to be done, and the mysterious explanation of what has happened to the molecules that made up the earthly Jesus and are now with God and a part of God is not half so important for us to understand as what we are going to be doing with the earthly molecules of our bodies, the gifts of time and resources we have been given, the powers of intellect that we have, and what it is that we can do to offer ourselves in love to others. That's the real question at the heart of The Ascension.

"Why are you standing, looking into heaven? You are my witnesses." When you open the Bible to learn more about what God has done to bring forgiveness into the world, or you read a book to a child, or share coffee and kind words with someone who is going through a hard time, or take part in any of these Mission projects listed right here, or say a prayer for a friend who is ill, or make peace with someone with whom you can't see eye to eye, or forgive the trespass of someone who has trespassed against you, you are his witness, and there, right there, is the Body of Christ.

We are all too often caught standing looking into heaven wondering where Christ is gone.

When in fact, we should be looking all around us and seeing where Christ is. For Christ is indeed among us, to be seen by each and all of us, this community, and the world, for whom Jesus' lived and died.

Amen