

“Ascended into Heaven or Up, Up, and Away”

Acts 1: 1-11; Ephesians 1: 15-23;
Luke 24: 44-53

One of the traditions in the church is to use an Affirmation of Faith during worship. The oldest and most familiar one is the Apostles' Creed; there are also lots of other ones.

As you may have guessed, I am very fond of the Apostles' Creed. It puts the Christian faith into a condensed form that can be memorized. That's so comforting.

However, since we use the traditional version of this creed, the language is a bit different from our everyday speech. We have “sitteth,” and “thence” and “the quick and the dead.”

That's part of what we'll be dealing with today, the last four lines about Jesus Christ.

“The third day he rose from the dead,
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”

We would just say sit, instead of sitteth, and there, instead of thence, and alive and dead instead of quick and dead.

Since this is Ascension Sunday, the Scriptures are all about Jesus' ascension into heaven, forty days after Easter, when Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. The Acts Scripture passage mentions Jesus being lifted in a cloud; the Luke passage has Jesus “withdrawing from the disciples and being carried into heaven.” Ephesians talks about Jesus' authority and position and function in heaven, once he's back there.

Don't worry about differences in details about the Ascension—where it took place, how many people were involved, cloud or no cloud, and so on. The Bible does that a lot. It's not a scientific record. It's not a New York Times journalism project—it's more of a collective memoir from different people. And, as we've all noticed, different people can remember the very same event in different ways.

For example, how I remember having a baby is different than the way the doctor remembers that event, or the nurse, or the baby's father, or the baby. Even so, it was all the same event.

We do know that Jesus had been crucified, he had died, he had been buried, and he had risen from the dead. Then, over the next forty days, he had appeared to the disciples many times, so that they would believe in his Resurrection.

After that forty days was over, Jesus gave his last teachings, and instructions, and marching orders to the disciples.

--Stay in Jerusalem and wait there for what God the Father has promised, which is the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which will confer great power.
--The disciples were to be witnesses for Jesus “to the ends of the earth.”
--“Repentance and forgiveness of sins were to be proclaimed in Jesus' name.”

Then came the ascension: Jesus went up to heaven. According to William Barclay,:

“The ascension must always remain a mystery, for it attempt to put into words what is beyond words and to describe what is beyond description.”

I suppose if the disciples themselves were talking to us about this, they would end up saying, "Well, you just had to be there."

And isn't it interesting that as we are thinking of Jesus being in heaven, we are also thinking of the people we have known being in heaven with him? As we celebrate Memorial Day, we are remembering and honoring those who have gone to their rest.

It doesn't exactly sound like heaven was going to be restful for Jesus, though. Not according to St. Paul in his letters to the Ephesians, anyway. It sounded like Jesus was going to have quite a bit to do.

I am going to read verses 20-23 again, only from the Message version of the Bible. I think you will like it.

"All this energy issues from Christ: God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but *forever*. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence."

I find that really wonderful and exciting. Jesus is in charge, of everything, including the Church, this church and all churches.

And we are part of the project. Just think of that—right here, right now, all of us are part of the church. We are meant to be ambassadors or representatives for Jesus. We are to spread this Christian faith throughout the world—including our own little corner of it.

And you know, we see it happening. I looked it up in our record books, and since June of 2003, when I first came here, there have been 20 baptisms. 2 were for babies, 8 were for children, 7 were for youth, and 3 for adults, in this church.

There have been 6 confirmations, and I can see 2 of them right here, when the young people accepted Jesus for themselves, and became full members of the church.

There have been some very big repentance/turn arounds in life, with renewals in faith, and people who have turned away from harmful things. I won't give the stats or the details on those, but you know who you are.

We've been able to spread the love of Jesus by sharing what we have giving missional money to the projects of the United Methodist Church, called apportionments. We give food items to the Food Pantry. You may not know it but this church buys people gasoline and medicine and will give out sandwiches and soup.

The Mission Row set up outside the Sanctuary tells a big story of the practical efforts we make in sharing the love of Jesus.

And the efforts of the youth, and the United Methodist Women, and the United Methodist Men! I am so proud. And also the Nothing but Nets project, buying specially-treated mosquito netting, to prevent malaria.

Wow! Because of this church, all sorts of needed supplies are sent to Sedalia, every fall, for the Festival of Sharing, to be distributed in Missouri and around the world.

We belong to a wonderful project, called the church. It's Jesus' project. He's in charge.

It's summed up very nicely in our bulletin in the little box: "Northern Boulevard United Methodist Church's mission is to be a community of Christians serving Christ through worship, education, fellowship, and service." And I would add in values like justice and truth and protection and mercy, too.

Even when we fall short, from time to time, and it does happen, but even then, we are still part of the heavenly, God-driven project called church, the body of Christ.

So thanks be to God, for Jesus' ascension into heaven, and his becoming God's right-hand man.

Amen.

(By Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)