
The Ascension

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Easter 7, the Sunday after the Ascension – Year B

Let me guess: you all made a special effort to get here today to celebrate the Feast of the Ascension, which ranks right up there with Christmas and Easter. OK, maybe not. The truth is, we often pass right over the Ascension without paying it much attention. Perhaps because it falls on a Thursday; or because it's sandwiched between the big feasts of Easter and Pentecost; or simply because it's hard to understand. But the Ascension is a pivotal moment in our sacred story—a hinge, as it were, between the past and the present—between story of the historical Jesus, and the ongoing story of the church.

We see this in today's readings, as Luke ends, and Acts begins, with the same event.

The resurrected Jesus has appeared to the disciples and finally convinced them that it's really him. They're relieved that the long nightmare of his passion and death and absence is over. Jesus is back! Their faith has been vindicated!

But just as they're settling into this new-and-improved reality, Jesus is lifted up and carried on a cloud into heaven. Imagine their dismay: there goes their friend, leader, hero, who was supposed to take them into heaven with him. They're not sure what they've just witnessed, or how they should feel about it, or what they should do next. So they stand there, gazing at the spot where their Lord just exited from the world as they know it.

Then, out of nowhere, two men in white robes appear, and ask why they're standing there, staring toward heaven, as if Jesus were gone forever, and their mission with him. This seems to jog their memory of Jesus' instructions: they're to return to Jerusalem, and wait for the Holy Spirit, and then proclaim repentance and forgiveness to the ends of the earth.

This event is confusing to us, too. After all, our modern worldview doesn't really allow for people riding off on clouds. What are we to make of this? Is Jesus with us or not? Is God on earth or in heaven? Are we in charge here, or is God?

You see, I'd like to pin things down. I'd like to be able to tell you that God is here, or there. That God will take care of this, and we need to take care of that. I'd like us to have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Because I can't do it all. And when a problem seems too big, I sometimes despair of making a difference, so I don't do anything, or I give up, or convince myself I've done my fair share, and hand the rest to God.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer takes issue with this approach to God: it keeps God at the edge of our lives and our world. It means that we call upon God only when we're feeling powerless, when we want God to come in and fix our problems for us. Bonhoeffer characterizes this as "*deus ex machina*"—God from the machine. This term comes from ancient Greek and Roman theatre, which had a convention of resolving intractable conflicts by dropping a divine character onto stage, with wires attached to pulleys. This divine super-character would resolve the conflict and then "exit as swiftly and mysteriously as he or she entered."^[1]

At first glance, the Ascension may look like just another iteration of this. After saving people from sin—and triumphing over evil and death—Super-Jesus' mission is done, so he flies off into the sky.

But that's not the story the Ascension tells. On the contrary, it continues the Gospel of God's continual coming and going, descending and ascending. Have you noticed how much traffic there is between heaven and earth, between God and humanity, through Jesus Christ? Just look at the movement in our creeds: God *came down* from heaven and was made

man. Then, Christ died, and was buried, and *descended* to the dead. But on the third day, he *rose* again—and then *ascended* into heaven. Of course, the story continues with Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends upon the budding church.

This is no superhero God, no *deus ex machina*, who neatly disappears after doing what humans could not do for themselves. No, this is a God who meets us on earth and stays with us and draws us to heaven—who meets us in our mortality and fills us with the Spirit and offers us eternal life.

And the Ascension reminds us that we live in the borderland between heaven and earth, between God’s transcendence and immanence, between God’s power and ours. We can’t pin it all down; we can’t define our responsibility so narrowly that there’s no ambiguity, no overlap, no risk. Instead, we trust that God is active through us, and beyond and above us. And so we apply ourselves to all things as if it were all up to us; and we trust God in all things, as if it were all up to God.

Let’s return for a moment to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A young Lutheran pastor, he, like the disciples, struggled to live faithfully without Jesus-in-the-flesh walking in front of him and spelling out what he should do.

When Bonhoeffer saw Jews being persecuted and murdered all around him, and his country barreling down the warpath, he discerned that he could not stand there, gazing into the sky of the glorious past or some otherworldly future. He could not just pray for a better world. He could not wait for someone else to fix the problem. Rather, because he trusted so completely in Jesus, and in God’s call and forgiveness, he risked action himself: he got involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He accepted responsibility not only for the evils of his time, but also for the morally ambiguous decision he made.

Bonhoeffer called this a “this-worldly Christianity”: a Christianity that takes seriously God’s presence in this world *and* God’s transcendence of it, and that frees and empowers us for courageous moral action in this world. “By *this-worldliness*, I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world.”^[ii]

In many ways, this is what the Ascension, with Pentecost, tells us as well: Fixing our eyes on God’s promise and kingdom, we see that we are called to and empowered for courageous moral action here on earth.

It seems appropriate to close with some of Bonhoeffer’s words, which I could also imagine in the mouth of the white-robed men who spoke to the dazed disciples: “Do and dare what is right, not swayed by the whim of the moment. Bravely take hold of the real, not dallying now with what might be. . . . Make up your mind and come out into the tempest of living. God’s command is enough and your faith in him to sustain you.”^[iii]

^[i] *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*, 122.

^[ii] *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 370

^[iii] *Ethics*.