



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

FEAST OF THE ASCENSION

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS
MAY 21, 2020

This is the second time I've had the opportunity to preach on the Ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God the Father, and I must confess my starting place with this feast remains the same as it did the last time I preached on it: Frustration.

There are a few reasons for my initial struggle with the narrative of the Ascension in Luke, the only gospel to give us a full accounting, though it is foreshadowed in John and referenced throughout the epistles. The first hurdle is certainly the most obvious: Jesus going Up. Luke's narrative runs us straight into the problem of views on cosmic architecture. Generally speaking, we no longer believe in an ancient cosmology which says heaven is directly above our heads, with our ceiling, the sky, serving as the flooring for God's dwelling.

The second reason emerges from the first: In an age of space exploration, the narrative of Jesus floating heavenward feels like the most fantastical, storybook element of the gospels. It is much easier for me to immediately extract deep, theological rootedness from the Virgin Birth and Incarnation, the uncreated God taking on created form to reach out to his creation, and even the bodily resurrection

of Jesus understood as the triumph of Divine life over Death. Compared with these, the Ascension initially feels...dare I say it, corny?

The third reason is a question which hopefully will lead us to tying all the previous problems together into something helpful: the question of ‘Why?’ Having triumphed over death and Hell, having returned in a resurrected body and appeared to his disciples, why does Jesus not STAY with us and immediately complete the work he inaugurated? My mind immediately races with possibility: A Jesus, now impervious to Death, bursting into Jerusalem and giving Pontius Pilate a good what-for, or a glorious charge into Rome in order to inaugurate the kingdom. Why does he just up and leave, why doesn’t he stay and save us?

Ah~ Here we are. All my “problems” with the Ascension belie my still insistent refusal to see the work of God in Christ for what he repeatedly told us it would be. It is the same problem the disciples had in urging Jesus to be a conquering king rather than the humble servant who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

What begins to take shape now as I think on the Ascension is the truth of a God who is not interested, ironically enough, in escapism. The whole point of the Incarnation was that God the Son became human flesh and subjected himself to the same experience of life we share, suffering and limitation included. This was not the messiah that Israel expected, but it's the messiah they received. Conversely, a resurrected Jesus, in a body which simultaneously bears scars and can appear and disappear at will, a deified body, is no longer the promised 'Emmanuel', 'God-with us'. He would simply be a God among us. In ascending and promising the disciples the Holy Spirit so that they might become the church, Christ's body on earth, Jesus refuses to become an Olympian God. He will not take on a human form simply as a guise, eat and drink and meddle, while remaining impervious to all of the consequences suffered by his followers. He will not dispense salvation and judgement from the tip of wand, floating above the ground, effectively above it all. Instead, Christ commits yet again to being God-with-us, by establishing his body, the Church, to be in and among the world as co-laborers in the work of redemption, subject to the same limitations we all face, yet aided by the Holy Spirit.

Allow me to engage in some very shaky grammatical tinkering, constructed more for the point than for its linguistic merits: I think so often that what we desire, or even what we unconsciously believe in, is a God who works ‘supranaturally’ rather than ‘supernaturally’. The difference is razor thin but very important. A supranatural God is one who works totally above nature, transcending not touching, while a supernatural God is one who rests on top of, who comes into direct contact in order to elevate.

In Jesus, God comes directly into contact with our bodies, our world, our suffering, and our limitations. In the Ascension of Jesus, we therefore do not see a God who prematurely rockets off to a lofty heaven after having saved the day. Instead, we see the resurrected body of Jesus, glorified but also still bearing the scars we gave him elevated into victory and drawn back to the heart of God the Father. The Ascension is the fulfillment of the promise of the Resurrection, that our bodies too will be raised and united with God in the fullness of time.

Lastly, and I am borrowing from Origen of Alexandria here, the Ascension is not just the return of Jesus to the right hand of the Father, but the elevation and triumph of the 'mind of Christ' above all the created order. That is to say, Jesus does not go up so he can break through Heaven's flooring; Jesus goes up as a sign that the self-sacrificial, unrelenting, wounded yet Triumphant Love of God for us is now the overarching paradigm in which we exist; it has carried the day, it is the final word. It is the Truth above and connected all of the problems which plague our world; this Love has been through the worst that Death and Hell could throw at it, and still it rose triumphant in Christ.

St Luke's, the Ascension is the promise for us as members of the church that God can take the broken, limited things of Earth, our bodies, scars and all, and raise them to new life. It is also the charge that God does not work 'supranaturally'. Instead, you are the thing of Earth which God meets and elevates. This is, above all else, is why we are the Church: To be more than just individuals, to be raised into a Body, to be Jesus for our world.

AMEN

THE CHURCH OF ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
487 HUDSON STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10014

TEL: 212.924.0562
FAX: 212. 633.2098

WEB SITE: WWW.STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG
EMAIL: INFO@STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG