

Ascension Sunday 2025 Sermon
June 1, 2025
Trinity Episcopal Church
Rev. Sarah D. Thomas

Today we hear the somewhat strange story of what is called the Ascension of Jesus: the moment when Jesus says goodbye to his disciples as they watch his body float up into heaven. Now, we modern 2025 people might have some questions about a body floating up. Where would it go? How far would it have to ascend until it officially got to God? How do we make sense of this story today and why does it matter?

This story of Jesus floating up into heaven is connected to how ancient people thought of the structure of the universe. In New Testament times, there was a three-tiered cosmology (cosmology being how people thought the universe, or reality, was structured). In those days, heaven was thought to be up, Earth was in the middle, and the underworld was below. This matters because even though our cosmology is different nowadays, this ancient one lingers in our theology and in our imaginations.

I'm right, aren't I? Don't you still think of God as "up?" When baseball players hit a homerun, they often point up to God, giving thanks. When we think of our loved ones who have died, we often think of them as up there somewhere. It makes sense that we think of heaven and God as up there because we are creatures of gravity and in a sense, everything *is* up. But the problem with this cosmology is that it makes God feel very far away and separate from ourselves and separate from the Earth. Stories like the Ascension can keep us thinking this way, even if unconsciously.

There is a different cosmology that is also ancient, but perhaps more helpful. It is a celtic cosmology in which the universe or reality is made of three concentric circles like the rings of a tree trunk. The outer layer is everyday life here on earth, life in the physical plane. Then the next circle inward is what the celts called the "otherworld," the place of the unconscious, where dreams and visions take place; the place where the ego is still present, but not in control. And then at the very center is the core, the divine, what we would call God or Christ consciousness. God at the very center - within - not up, but inside or way down deep - at the heart of things.

The Ascension represents the moment when Jesus leaves this earthly realm to join God. But what if instead of thinking of Jesus going up, we think of him going down to the center? How might this affect how you pray? Praying to God at the center of reality, or at the center of your heart, is a very different experience than to a God who is up and out there. How might it feel in your body? How might it change how you pray?

Dr. Michael Kearney is a local doctor and Buddhist contemplative teacher. He teaches about this celtic cosmology with the concentric circles. He likes to think of deep roots connecting the concentric circles. So, if the outer layer is the earth and the physical plane, imagine roots reaching down through the layers to the center. In this way, when we pray, we attune to God or Christ at the very center and our prayer life is like drawing this love and this Christ-consciousness out of the center, up through the roots, into our very selves — a communication

through the roots to the center, back and forth. Kearney encourages us to practice this kind of prayer life by attuning to nature – that nature itself, the earth itself, can be a portal to Christ who lives at the center, down deep, connected by the roots.

What if Jesus, on the day of the Ascension, did not go up, but went down to the heart of reality? This way of thinking of Jesus' place in the universe is more in *alignment* with his teachings, anyhow. Over and over in the gospels, we see a Jesus who goes to the bottom of society, not to the top. He sought out the poor, the outsider, the suffering.

Once I was going through a particular hard thing. I was full of shame. I was pretty low on myself. Not a proud moment. A good friend sent me a text and she wrote, "Jesus is so hanging out with you right now." It caught me off guard and I thought to myself, "that's right!" Jesus was with me *especially* when I was feeling low; *especially* when I was suffering or feeling in a hard spot. Jesus goes down – to hang out with us in our lower, most bottom experiences. As a priest, I often hear things like, "How could God abandon me during this time??" or "Why would God do this to me?" But these kinds of thoughts are stuck in Ascension Day thinking. We need to remember, instead, that Jesus goes down. In our most suffering moments, Jesus is so hanging out with us there.

I recently heard this beautiful metaphor for God from pastor Jared Alcantara: He likens God to a parent in the swimming pool, holding up arms as the little child stands at the edge of the pool with water wings, trying to summon up the courage to jump in. And God is there saying, "I got you ... just jump." God is down there in the pool as we stand at the edge.

Of course... the implications of where we imagine Jesus to be have a much larger impact than just how it affects us as individuals. Where we imagine Jesus to be impacts how we view others. The Ascension can make us think of Jesus as up and away, sitting on a throne on high, right next to God. It is all over scripture. Just look at today's Psalm: God as enthroned on high, mighty and all powerful up there. Listen to verses 2 and 3: "For the Lord most high is to be feared; he is the great king over all the earth. He subdues the people under us, and the nations under our feet." These kinds of Psalms were written to inspire a future hope in a God all in all who would rule more powerfully and more benevolently than all the tyrants of the earth. It was a Psalm of radical hope. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that this psalm imagines *God* as king, instead of the current kings of the world – God as "the gracious ruler who does indeed manage well, provide for, protect the weak, and intervene for the helpless." It sounds... good!

But you can also see how this could be abused. You can see how it can start to sound like aligning God with imperial power. It could be appropriated into a kind of nationalism or authoritarianism, in which these kinds of words in scripture can be used to align God or Jesus with wealth and dominion and authoritarian control from on high.

But no. Our God goes down. Our God is a lowly one. Jesus hangs out with those whom society puts at the very bottom: with the woman breaking the rules, with the lepers no one wants to touch, with the outcast, with the broken, with the lonely. Jesus goes down and stays there.

The Catholic priest Henri Nouwen took this downward movement of Jesus seriously

and he left a prestigious life of being a writer and teacher at an ivy league university to go live in a l'Arche Community, which is an intentional community where people with and without developmental disabilities live together as equals. Living in this community changed Nouwen forever. He began to write about intentional downward mobility, which is completely counter-cultural in our world. He says our three greatest temptations, which we are confronted with again and again, are the temptation to be relevant, the temptation to be spectacular, and the temptation to be powerful. In the l'Arche Community, none of these things matter, just living in community, sharing gifts and weaknesses, and serving each other in love and mutuality. These communities model themselves on Jesus' way of humility and service.

But the Gospels take this even further. Not only does Jesus hang out with those who are put at the bottom of society, he *identifies* with them. In Matthew 25, Jesus says this famous line: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." ... "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me." When we serve those whom society has cast out, we are serving Christ himself.

So, on this Ascension Day, let's flip the script. Let's see Jesus where he is: not up in the clouds, but rooted down here in the places of greatest suffering. He is hanging out at border crossings and hospital rooms, neighborhood clinics and immigration courtrooms, Gaza food distribution sites, homeless shelters, and swimming pools where children are learning how to swim. The Big Beautiful Gospel shows a Jesus who goes down, who sides with the poor – a Jesus who cares for the children, the elderly, the hungry, the refugee, the immigrant, and the imprisoned. In these days when the powers-that-be threaten to destroy systems and institutions that provide basic care, health, and protection for the most vulnerable, it is *we* who must rise. It is *we* who must ascend. not ascending in the way of empire or dominance or ego, but in the way of resurrection. We ascend by going down deeper into Christ, We ascend by protest, by phone calls, by emails, by writing letters, by speaking out as the church. As Reverend Jen Butler says, "[This] moment demands a visible, moral witness grounded in faith and justice." Let's make our voices be heard.