

Ascension

Back in the good old days, when the earth was flat and the sun flew around it (perhaps pulled by wild stallions), and a sturdy but unpredictably leaky membrane or dome or something – anyway, a firmament – held up the water above the sky – in those days these things were so much easier to communicate. The dead went down into the ground (like they mostly do now), and so the realm of the dead, in whatever way you understood that, was underground. The divine had its place on the mountains and perhaps beyond the stars. There wasn't much notion that you might, as a human, travel beyond that. Icarus over in Greece had given it a try and the whole affair went quite badly. The Greeks looked to Olympus and thunderbolts, and the Hebrew people to Sinai/Horeb and the luminous clouds above. “Down” was the realm of death. “Up” was the realm of immortality and eternity.



These days, there's a piece of humans' first known successful attempt to ascend toward the firmament – a fragment of Orville and Wilbur's flying beach contraption – stuck to a helicopter flitting around Mars. We have the International Space Station. Kate Rubin, the astronaut daughter of the Rev. Ann Hallisey and Bishop Beisner, just returned from orbiting the planet in it for a few months, and she has reported no sightings of divine beings frolicking above, or plotting interference on, the planet surface. Meanwhile, back on Earth, generations of students advancing into middle school have taken a look at the VBS craft projects involving tagboard cutouts of the bottom of Jesus' feet stuck to the ceiling and started making sarcastic cracks about how far toward Alpha Centauri Jesus might be at this point. It gets awkward. The metaphor – the concept of the Ascension as levitation – is regularly crushed in a collision with post-Copernican cosmology, and one can see why the Holy See fought the new science so hard. Preachers have been thrashing around for 500 years, trying not to lose everybody who has advanced past the third grade.

Of course, it really happened. Of course, Luke is telling the truth, in the Gospel and in Acts. Jesus, in a form that they could see and touch and share a clambake on the beach with, really gathered the disciples one last time after his resurrection. And then he was “taken up.” He “ascended.” Like Moses, he disappeared into the Cloud of the Presence of God, which, remember, in the geography of the time, might well have been overhead – but not necessarily literally. Maybe yes, maybe no. Unlike Moses, when the Cloud went away, Jesus was no longer here in the flesh; he was wherever the Cloud goes. But the story isn't about locating the personal body of Jesus of Nazareth on a GPS. It's about a new state of being for him, for us, for the whole relationship between God and human beings. The story is not about time and space. It's about how that which is beyond time and space is real, right here in the space-time world we are able to perceive, and it is also simultaneously real in the world that is beyond our measly comprehension. It's about a curtain pulled aside for a moment, between us and the reality that's usually beyond our perception. It's a sighting, a glimpse, a showing that the way through the grave does not simply lead “down” to the land of the dead, as we had theretofore imagined, but “up” to the realms of grace and light and love and eternal life with Creator and Redeemer.

There's nothing wrong with the old story of the Ascension. We just misplace the key sometimes. Don't feel too bad about it – angels apparently had to come and tell even the people who were standing there at the time to stop staring up at the sky and to please try to remember how God actually comes and goes in the world. Maybe riding on the clouds with muscular arms uplifted and looking like Charlton Heston with extra bronzer and lots of hairspray. Or maybe like a baby in a barn, or a country preacher, or a mysteriously successful feeding program, or the taste of bread and wine and tears. Remember?

If we can't see Jesus most of the time, how do we stay in touch with this ineffable reality that defies metaphor? Our Lord had the grace to anticipate that question. Hang tight. Stay together. Fire and wind, comfort and counsel, power and answered prayers, are on the way.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Blessings,
Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson

Ascension Day Prayers and Readings [here](#).