

My late wife used to tell a story from a friend of hers a few years ago. A little boy she knew was very upset when his grandfather died. His mum sat down with him and tried to comfort him by explaining that grandad had gone to be with Jesus. “Where’s Jesus?” , the little boy asked. “Well, he’s in heaven” replied mum.

“Where’s heaven?” the little boy persisted. “Well,” said Mum, struggling a bit by this time, “Heaven’s up in the sky, beyond the clouds”. This seemed to satisfy him, and Mum heard no more about it until a few days later, when in a great frenzy of excitement, the little boy called her to come out into the garden. “Look mum, look!” he shouted, pointing at a plane taking off into the clouds. “It’s another load of them dead ‘uns going up!”

We can all smile at stories like this, but they highlight for us a problem that modern Christians have with the ascension. The book of Acts tells us that Jesus was taken up to heaven as the disciple watched and a cloud hid him from their sight. This might make perfect sense in the first century where many believed the earth was flat and the clouds are God’s footstool. But we live in a world with aircraft; where men and women have gone into outer space. Whatever heaven is, it isn’t a place just beyond the clouds. So, what sense can we make of the story of Jesus being lifted up and transported to heaven in a cloud? The risk is that we write it off as fiction - as having nothing to say to us at all.

We place a huge importance on the events of Easter, on Jesus rising from the dead; Ascension Day can slip past almost unnoticed. But the ascension of Jesus has just as much to say to us as the resurrection does. It’s vital that we find a way through the story, through the picture language, as meaning lies within it.

First of all, as I mentioned on Thursday, it’s about letting go. Imagine the joy, the amazement Jesus’ disciples must have felt when they discovered that Jesus was alive again. They knew he’d been executed, and suddenly here he was alive and with them to see and hear and touch. If you’ve lost someone you love it’s the ultimate fantasy. We’d all love to turn the clock back and have them with us again. But the resurrection isn’t about turning the clock back. Remember that first Easter morning meeting with Mary in the garden? Jesus says surprisingly sternly - “Do not cling to me ... I am going to my Father.” For Mary’s sake, he has to scotch that fantasy immediately. Things aren’t about to go back to how they were before he died. He’s not back *from* the dead; he’s gone *through* death and beyond, and those who love him must let him go on.

That’s a hard lesson for so many of us. We’re afraid of loss, we’re afraid of change, we want the security of things being as they’ve always been, and so we cling. Maybe it’s to a person or a relationship that needs to move on. Maybe it’s to a job or a role in life that needs to change. Whatever our particular fear, the risen Jesus speaks: “Do not cling to me.... I am ascending to my Father and your Father.” Let go. Move on. Trust.

That’s hard enough when we can see the next step. But the Ascension has a second scary thing to teach us, and it’s this: we have to be prepared to wait. In Luke, Jesus says “Now I am sending you what the Father has promised. Stay in the city, then, until you are clothed with the power from on high.” Wait for God to act and to empower you before you rush into action. And for many of us, waiting is even harder than letting go.

Remember the old days of supermarket checkout queues and cursing yourself for choosing the slow one? Have you ever felt frustration rising inside you when you get caught in a traffic jam, even when you’re not on a life-or-death mission? Of course you have, and so have I. Having to wait can drive us crazy - which is

probably why the shops are full of Santas in September and Easter Eggs in January! Waiting feels like a waste of time; it feels empty and unproductive, and while we're engaged in waiting it's very hard for us to convince ourselves or anybody else that we're doing something worthwhile.

Waiting means we aren't in control, which is why it's so very hard to do. But that's why it's a habit we must learn if we're ever going to be any use in God's service. So much of the time we Christians act as if we can go straight from the Resurrection to Pentecost: Jesus is risen, we're on the winning team, off we go to change the world. No! The Ascension of Jesus - withdrawing from his disciples, and leaving them in a sense in a vacuum, not knowing what the next step was going to be - is part of the story, and we miss it out at our peril. If we don't learn how to wait for God, we will very quickly lose the plot in our discipleship. If we don't recognise those periods in our lives where God seems to have withdrawn from us, and realise that it's OK - that our waiting is for a purpose - then we may lose heart and even lose faith. The Ascension reminds us that it's not we who are in control; it's God.

So, the Ascension teaches us to let go; and it teaches us the importance of waiting. But perhaps most important of all, it reminds us of our destiny. Jesus didn't come back from death; he went through death and on, and he told us that we can follow him. In Jesus' birth, God came in person to where we are; but in his ascension, Jesus takes us to where God is. The God who became human takes the whole of human experience, from birth to death, and brings it back to his Father's heart. So that what we are and what God is can be brought together and made one. So that we can be part of the life of heaven.

Who knows what actually happened on that first Ascension Day? Who knows what the disciples actually saw as Jesus was taken out of their sight? What's important is what we do know. We know that Jesus didn't appear to his disciples again in bodily form. We know that they had to let him go, and they had to wait, not knowing what would happen. And we know that the impact of Jesus' reunion in glory with his Father was felt among them 10 days later, as the Holy Spirit erupted in the wind and flames and miraculous gifts of Pentecost. As Jesus brought his humanness into complete and total union with God, something new happened. Human beings began to experience something divine at work in their bodies and minds and hearts. God was living and working in them and through them. Their lives began to become windows through which the light of heaven could shine. They had begun to realise their true potential, their divine destiny.

So it can be for us, too. We gather to worship the ascended one; the fully human, fully divine one who has taken our flesh and blood to make its home in heaven. Of course, we don't believe in a heaven perched just above the clouds; but how tragic it would be if we ceased to believe in the reality that is heaven altogether! It's where God is; it's what God created us to share; it's our gift and our birthright; it's the destination that alone can give sense and perspective to all the mess and muddle of human life.

Let's pray today that we may understand more and more the promise that the ascension holds out to us. Let's pray for courage to let go of what has been. Let's pray for faithfulness to wait for God even when it feels as though he's left us. And most of all, let's look forward with excitement and hope to all that God's future has in store.

Amen.

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