

Sermon text – Revd Dr Lisa Cornwell

## Ascension Day

21<sup>st</sup> May 2020

Readings: Acts 1:1-11  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
Luke 24:44-53

Big idea: One Ascension? - Now you see me now you don't.

Between the climactic events of Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jesus bids his disciples farewell and apparently floats off into heaven. What are we to make of this?

The Ascension has caused confusion down the centuries and defies full explanation but it rightly remains a significant festival in the church calendar. As we wrestle to make sense of the texts we must take care not to lose the sense of mystery and wonder present in them.

We tend to think of the Ascension as one single event but I suggest is that the event referred to in our readings today was not the *only* ascension of Jesus. According to my learned colleague, Moira Astin, who has written a book on the subject,

Jesus first ascended to heaven on Easter day. Cast your mind back to the events at the empty tomb on that first Easter morning. In John's gospel we learn about Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Christ. Jesus says to Mary: "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father'" (John 20:17) Mary is cautioned *not* to touch Jesus.

Wind on a few hours and in Luke's gospel we have Jesus specifically commanding the disciples to touch him: "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. *Touch me and see*" (Luke 24:39). Then back in John's gospel there is that classic encounter with doubting Thomas which occurred a week later. Jesus instructs Thomas: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." (John 20:27) Clearly, then Jesus has already ascended to his Father if they are now able to embrace him.

When you read today's Lukan narrative in context it appears as though the ascension described is still on the day of Jesus' resurrection. However, in the sequel to his gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke confirms that the resurrected Christ appeared

to the disciples numerous times over a period of 40 days before finally being taken from them.

In fact, there appears to be countless ascensions because Jesus does not hang around continually with his disciples from day one of his resurrection. For the next 40 days he appears to be playing a game of hide and seek with them popping out and making them jump with delight when they are least expecting it. Where was he when he wasn't appearing to people? It is likely that during that period of time, Jesus was travelling back and forth between heaven and earth.

It would seem then that what we understand as *the* Ascension is in fact Jesus' last and final ascension; it marks the end of his post resurrection appearances to the disciples. It is his final exaltation to remain at the right hand of the Father. This one is the tear jerker as the disciples know that they will not see Jesus in physical form again – not this side of the grave at least. It is the final goodbye. They have the promise of the Spirit but for the moment they are left looking up into heaven, not totally comprehending.

The disciples knew without a doubt that Jesus had been raised. They had experienced the joy of his physical presence among them but they also had to keep going in the times that Jesus was not physically present with them. That is the biggest challenge. But following Jesus' final departure, although he was no longer physically present with them, he would be by his Spirit. In Matthew's gospel, at the end the great commission, comes that wonderful promise: "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Like the disciples, following the Ascension, we do not see Jesus but we can trust his promise that he is with us. Sometimes we may sense his nearness more than other times. In the times where we struggle to find him in the midst of our lives, we must hang on to his promise and the memory of those graced moments when we knew his reassurance. Or as St Ignatius put it – in the times of desolation, remember the times of consolation. God is still there whether we feel it or not.

The hymn writer George Matheson had looked forward to a promising life. He was studying for the ministry and preparing to marry the woman he loved. Then he began to go blind. His world began to go into darkness. He lost many of his friends,

and his fiancée decided she could not cope with a blind man and left him. His world was shaken but not his relationship with God. He wrote the hymn: “O Love that will not let me go”. The second verse begins “O Light that follow’st all my way” and the third “O joy that seekest me through pain”. George had faith in a great God. In the final verse “O Cross that liftest up my head” affirms not only his steadfast relationship with God but also God’s relationship with him.<sup>1</sup>

God does not fail us, even when the world does and we continue to be besieged by Coronavirus. Today let us give thanks and honour to our risen and ascended Lord, who is also present in our midst. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration taken from David Adam, *Sixty more sermon illustrations*, p.63