

Lk 24:44-53
 5 June 2011
 Ascension Sunday / 7th Sunday of Easter

“Interwoven”

A week ago on Friday, Banu and I went to some Mennonite markets on the other side of the lake. At each one of them, I noticed a sign saying that they would be closed for Ascension Day. It's always the Thursday forty days into the Easter season, so it was this past Thursday.

I told Banu that I found it interesting that the Mennonites actually take the day off to celebrate the Ascension of the Lord. For many of us, I imagine that the day came and went this week without our even being aware of it. That shouldn't be **entirely** unexpected; Ascension is one of those days it's hard to wrap our heads around. That's partly due to the name. Ascension—what the heck is that about, anyway?

In his gospel, here's how Luke puts it: “Then [Jesus] led [the disciples] out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God” (24:50-53).

In ancient times, people tended to think of the universe as though it were a three-story house. The heavens were the top story; our world was the middle story, and as for the underworld, as the name suggests, it's down there below the surface of the ground. It would be the basement.

Well, we've been in outer space, where there is no “up” or “down.” And as for the nether regions, I once heard a traveling evangelist tell an interesting story about that. I guess this would have been in the 1980s. He claimed that workers in France doing deep well drilling made a bizarre discovery. He said that they could hear the screams of the doomed rising up to them! Apparently, the location of hell is beneath France.

(I'm not so sure. I think the evangelist's comments were based on a subconscious aversion to the French—or maybe to fossil fuels!)

Anyway, today we wouldn't tell that story as someone floating up into the sky. We no longer perceive the cosmos in the “three story” way, as did the ancients. We don't see **ourselves** the same way. You do realize that we are mostly empty space? At the atomic level, there are electrons spinning around the nucleus, like tiny solar systems. Even smaller particles are being discovered all the time.

Going in the other direction, by using ever more powerful telescopes, we're gazing deeper, toward the edge of the universe itself. We're looking at light that has taken billions of years to arrive at Earth. (It appears we have a new “three story” image: macrocosmic, mesocosmic, and microcosmic!)

Luke is speaking of the resurrection body of Christ. Imagining the physics of that is enough to get your head spinning! We might think of him as becoming interwoven with our space and time. Earlier in chapter 24, that could be how he appears and disappears to the disciples at will.

However we conceive of it (and I won't belabor the point), why is the Ascension of the Lord so important? Why must Jesus depart? I promise you—this isn't just abstract theory. This has very “real world” meaning for us.

Last week, Banu mentioned some stuff that the Australian missiologist Michael Frost recently said.¹ This was during a conference less than two months ago in Budapest, Hungary. He said he'd spoken with some Christian surfers a few years before. When he asked who their favorite surfer was, he described it as “pandemonium.” He got them to narrow it down to Kelly Slater, who has won more championships than any other surfer. He was able to get them to describe him in detail.

Then he asked them to describe Jesus. Aside from stuff like, “Son of God” and “died for our sins,” they couldn't say anything. Frost said he's noticed the same thing in the church and even in the seminary where he teaches. People seem unable to talk about Jesus the person; they can't speak about his lifestyle.

But as I watched the video what **really** caught my attention was something else he said. Frost spoke of a “spirituality of engagement.” This is a spirituality of engagement as opposed to a spirituality of retreat, of withdrawing. That is, retreating or withdrawing from the world.

It's the idea that the only way to really connect with Christ is by retreating to services of worship, or by going on retreats, or by going to places specifically labeled as “Christian.” He doesn't reject those experiences; he strongly affirms them (as do I). But he also emphasizes engaging with Christ in the world.

For those who actually **care** about connecting with Jesus, there can be the danger of living in a Christian “bubble.” There's the danger of not being able to see Jesus in the cinema, in art, in the workplace, in school, in science, in everyday life. As he was talking about this stuff, it dawned on me that this is what Ascension is all about.

As the Nazarene professor Andy Johnson puts it, “our very flesh is constantly interchanging elements with the rest of the material universe.” There's that subatomic particle stuff! At that level, it's hard to draw a line between “us” and “not-us.” Thinking about that theologically, with God's raising the body of Jesus, “the redemption of the cosmos as a whole has begun.”²

Because of the Ascension of the Lord, Jesus is everywhere. What that means is that there are no “God-free” zones.

Frost also talks about “prevenient grace,” that is, the way God works **prior** to anyone's action. God extends grace **before** we decide to do this or that. The question is not: “Will we bring God into a godless world?” The question is: “Will we find out what God is **already** doing in the world and get involved?” Again, there are no “God-free” zones.

So, here it is again, just in case what I've said isn't crystal clear: why is the Ascension of the Lord so important? Why must Jesus depart? Why does Jesus say, in effect, “It's time for me to fly!”?

Jesus must depart, because frankly, it's time for the disciples to grow up. In John 16, Jesus tells them, “it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the

¹ vimeo.com/22699742

² Andy Johnson, “Our God Reigns: The Body of the Risen Lord in Luke 24,” *Word and World* 22:2 (Spring 2002) 141.

Advocate [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (v. 7). He’s told them that they will do even greater things than he has done (Jn 14:12).

Without Jesus around, even the resurrected Jesus, the Spirit of Christ pervades—is interwoven—everywhere.

It’s difficult to understand that. Earlier in chapter 24, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus are downcast; they’re crestfallen. Jesus comes up and speaks with them, though they don’t recognize him. They say that “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21). But notice what happens. “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (v. 27).

Now we have today’s scripture reading. When he appears to the gathered group of disciples, he tells them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (v. 44).

Our friend Andy Johnson points out that “the Old Testament never directly says that the Messiah will suffer, die, or be raised from the dead.”³ That’s true, and that’s why Jesus was such a problem for even well-meaning people. The disciples need to understand. So Jesus repeats what he did on the road to Emmaus. For the disciples who think they’re seeing a ghost, “he opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (v. 45).

Johnson says that “Jesus begins reshaping their imagination, reshaping the categories they had used to make sense of what God was doing in their world.” Their culture has shaped them to think in a certain way. Then here comes Jesus, completely turning that stuff on its head!

There’s a difference between translating and interpreting. When we **translate**, we go from one language to another. For example, we take the English word “dog” and go to the Spanish word “perro,” or to the Turkish word “köpek.” However, when we **interpret**, we assign meaning, and sometimes that meaning can be quite different from what people expect, or want, to hear. Sometimes it’s different from what **we** want to hear!

For the disciples to understand who Jesus is, it will mean “reinterpreting the entire biblical narrative, ‘all the scriptures.’”⁴ Jesus knows what he has to do. He has to blow their minds. He has to, almost literally, rock their world!

The disciples have their vision radically expanded. They must learn that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (v. 47). The old categories no longer work. They can’t presume to “have” or “own” Jesus.

Can we think of ways in which we do that? Can we think of ways in which we presume to “have” or “own” Jesus? Is it possible that others are turned away because we present Jesus as being “ours”? (I say “we,” because I include myself in the question.) Do we too rarely ask the question, “How can we as the church serve the community?” Or do we too often wonder, “What can they do for us?” Remember, there are no “God-free” zones.

³ Johnson, 136.

⁴ Johnson, 136.

If we're willing to say that, should that lessen our desire to engage with, and strive for the lifestyle of, Christ? If we see Ascension as meaning that Jesus is everywhere, should that quench our desire to live that life in the world? I wonder, how could it?

I've said a little bit about science, so as I conclude, I want us to do an experiment. Can we test the hypothesis that Jesus does not belong to us? What would our lives look like? What would our church look like? If we believe, as we say in the Apostles' Creed, that "he ascended into heaven"—or to borrow my phrase, he is interwoven in space and time—we need not prove Jesus. We need only to live Jesus. Those in the world around us will see the difference. I believe that that's an experiment well worth carrying out.