

## Sermon for Ascension – June 5, 2011 – “Where Did Jesus Go?”

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

“Where did Jesus go? How high is up? Is that where heaven is? If Jesus ascended into heaven, might we still find his body up there?” These aren’t questions that only children might ask. And if the children do indeed ask them, what answers can we give?

Whether we realize it or not – these are profound questions about:

- cosmology (the study of the nature and origins of the universe)
- theology (the study of the nature, character and actions of God)
- Christology (the study of the nature, character and actions of Jesus Christ).

But doesn’t everyone ask similar questions? Aren’t there adults – young and old – genuinely seeking answers? What answers do we give? I’d be willing to guess that few of us seriously imagine that heaven is “up there” – that is, some place up in the clouds. I’m also thinking that there are few of us conceive of a three-leveled world with earth in the middle, heaven above and hell beneath – as they did in ancient times. But we continue to think of heaven as an existence – if not a place – that transcends our present existence. So why not refer to it as “out there,” as long as we do not limit “out there” to a spatial “out there.”

How high is up? It’s beyond our comprehension. Is that where heaven is? Could be, as long as we do not limit heaven to spatial dimensions. If Jesus ascended into heaven, might we still find his body up there? Now **that** is the question to ponder today.

The Ascension of our Lord celebrates one aspect of the resurrection, namely Jesus’ exaltation. He didn’t wait 40 days to be glorified at God’s right hand. That – you see – had already happened at his resurrection. As it is – we can’t even begin to grasp the scope of this mystery. Therefore, throughout the Easter season we focus our attention first on one aspect of the mystery and then on another. On Easter we concentrate on Jesus’ victory over sin and death; today we contemplate his enthronement. On Pentecost we will reflect on the gift of the Spirit.

The flow of today’s readings carries us through the message of what today is all about. In the first, we stand with the disciples gazing up at the sky, not knowing what has happened or what it might mean for us. In the second reading, Paul explains the theology behind Jesus’ exaltation. Then in the Gospel reading we ponder the commission given first to the disciples and then to us:

To be Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth.

To proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins – the good news of the kingdom of God – to all nations

Jesus gave His disciples – the world – a vision of the Kingdom of God. He promised it. The disciples expected it. It failed to come as expected. There was no sudden divine intervention to overthrow the oppressors – to set the people free, to restore the kingdom of Israel. When his disciples questioned him on this, Jesus turned to them and said: **“It is not for you to know the times and the periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”** They were to proclaim the coming kingdom and they were to **be** the kingdom. They were to pray “your kingdom come” and they were to let the vision of the kingdom set their agenda. They were not to be waiting around for the

kingdom – qualifying themselves for future entry and busying themselves with recruiting drives so that others might one day enter, too. They were to live out the life of the kingdom – to let God reign now – and to allow that life and love to extend to the ends of the earth – to all people now.

**We** are that community of disciples. **We** are the life of the kingdom. **We** are the people of the vision. **We** are – here and now – the fulfillment of the promise yet to reach its completion. That is the declaration of the Acts of the Apostles and the gospels. That is its answer to the cry: but when will you restore the kingdom?

In Luke’s drama the two angels – who’d already been on stage at the empty tomb – reassure the disciples: **“This Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”** In other words: you can be as sure of his return as you are of his resurrection. Or to put it more simply still – you may be confident of the coming of the kingdom and of Jesus, because God has vindicated Him. God has identified himself with Him. Jesus is Lord.

With their **“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”** the angels are directing the disciples back to present earthly reality with a smile. **Now** they know who Jesus is. **Now** they know who they themselves are. They are still the eleven with a very bad track record – still eleven **very** human beings. They hadn’t become supermen – they had no wings. The angels had made sure they had their feet and their faces to the ground. They were only human – limited by time and space. They were vulnerable to prejudice and misunderstanding. They were exposed to people’s whims of love and hatred; just like Jesus had been. But this was the pattern of God’s presence – the pathway of love and grace which they were to follow.

God has chosen real people as the vehicle of divine presence – just as God had chosen Jesus and vindicated him by raising him from the dead. Still, we should not – for one second – believe that Jesus’ promise of the kingdom of justice, peace and holiness is fulfilled in the Church. It’s simply not so and was never meant to be. Yet the astounding thing is that it’s **partly** true. Jesus promised that the kingdom of God was near at hand and through the events of Easter – on Pentecost – the Church was born. The Church still longs for fulfillment of the promise, but it’s not just a waiting praying church – nor just a promising preaching one. As I’ve said, we – like the disciples before us – have work to do. Already in the Church the hope is to begin to find fulfillment. Still, we’re only human. Yet it was this fully humanness which bore God’s presence in Jesus.

God chooses the vulnerable, limited, foolishness of humanity still; that of the disciples – and yours and mine – and every bit as real as Jesus’. This is the way of God’s kingdom.

The truth is, the Church of today – including you and me – is no better than the disciples or the Church of any other time or place. Look at our track record. Yet it’s us and people like us whom grace has seized upon and it is by this grace alone that we can stand and make a go of it. This is true for us as individuals. It’s also true for us as a church.

So much has happened here these last 30 or so years – way to much to recount now. So I’m guessing that many of us can understand what it’s like to stand there on a hill, looking at hopes and dreams disappear up into the sky, wondering what’s going to happen next. So many changes – in the life of the church and in our own homes.

Some good. Some bad. And lots in between. We’ve planned and talked about the future of this church – what it will look like in the coming years. We’ve thought about what

God might be calling us to do. There've been births and deaths, illnesses and healings, disappointments and surprising discoveries of new life. So many things up in the air...

This – I think – is what's going on for those disciples. The Jesus they'd lost once, and then found risen from the dead, is now gone again. While he was with them, he always had an answer, a plan. They usually wouldn't understand it – but it's comforting to think that somebody knows what's going on. And now...he's gone, and they look at the place where they saw him last.

**“Suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?’”**

Isn't that amazing? Not the kind of thing you expect to hear in church huh? **“Why are you looking up toward heaven?”** It's all the more puzzling because these angels then say that Jesus **“will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”** So shouldn't our eyes be firmly fixed on the last place we saw him? What goes up, must come down... Jesus went up, so surely he's up there, and when he comes again it will be from on high. Right? Sorry – that's a trick question...you see, the big problem with looking up is that you can't see the person next to you. **“Why do you stand there looking up toward heaven?”**

It reminds me of the question the two men in white robes at Jesus' tomb asked the women. **“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen! Why do you stand there looking up toward heaven?”** You have work to do.

You have a commission to fulfill. A great commission – which Matthews's account of these events tells us is to: **“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations – baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”** From now on, you are the body of Christ! You must proclaim the good news; you must drive out the demons that hold people in their addicting clutches! You must embrace all people with the merciful love of God.

So just where did Jesus go? Right here! Right here, because all of us – each and every one of us – now stand as an answer to the question.

Thanks be to God.