

The Ascension

In one short sentence, Luke brings us to our knees with his retelling of the ascension of Jesus.

50 When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

An attempt to simplify this story while still embracing the crucial points, begins with recognizing that most scholars dealing with this event, see it as part of wider process. That is;

It is God's intention that his created order; mankind; be reconciled to him and (metaphorically) return to the garden. The garden; symbolically; is the place of ultimate peace and order, in the presence of God.

The problem is of course, that right at the start of this epic tale, mankind misbehaved and could no longer stay there. The scene was set for the rest of the epic tale to begin unfolding a journey of encounter and reconciliation.

At the other end of the epic tale, we hear scholar Larry Bouchard¹ commenting on the Ascension event,

the problem is that, being beyond ordinary space and time, there is literally nothing to see? Is it because Acts directs us away from "looking up"? Might the oneness of our minds and perceptions with Christ, and the continual anticipation of the Spirit, open our imaginations to another possibility? The framing scenes invite us to shift perspectives, from being observers to being participants.

The question then, is what is the framing scene? The answer lies in seeing the big picture which in outline, goes something like this;

1. Creation (The beginning. An idyllic state of homostasis)
2. The fall (The tree of knowledge)
3. The flood. (The first baptismal metaphor. Evil is washed away and only 'the good' survive)

¹ BOUCHARD, LARRY D., "Theological Perspective on Luke 24:44–53", Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A (ed. D. L. BARTLETT – B. B. TAYLOR) (Louisville, KY 2010) II, 518.

4. God sends his son (The Birth of Jesus. The confrontation with all that is against God. Jesus is the sacrificial lamb. He will pay the price of reconciliation)
5. Jesus is crucified
6. The resurrection
7. The appearances are a sign of the something more in which evil is powerless in the presence of powerless-ness. The ascension becomes the closing event in the appearances but for the flow to continue, we must embrace mission with a vibrant compassion. Salvation is the other face of acceptance and engagement. To further quote Larry Bouchard;
 - a. The ascension of Jesus astonishes. Though it happens at a particular place, near Bethany, it surpasses ordinary perception. Jesus blesses the disciples and is “carried up into heaven,” in but four Greek words. No mode of ascension is reported, no *deus ex machina*. In Acts 1:9–11 a “cloud” takes and obscures him, and two angel-like figures ask sardonically, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Indeed, Luke leaves room for our imaginations to enter. He hints that the astonishment of the witnesses—who become prostrate (*proskunesantes*, v. 2, same MSS) when Jesus departs—is more significant than the divine aerodynamics.²
8. Pentecost . It’s up to us. We the gathered faithful, should now be engaged with the task of reconciling the world. To achieve this task, we are empowered with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

At This point, we do well to hear Luke asking the disciples, why it is that they stand looking up to heaven. The nature of the journey back to the garden has been we defined. It is over to us. Like Noah and his family, we have been baptized and now stand as inheritors of the kingdom. We are certainly not going to be able embrace our heritage by just standing and looking up to heaven.

Many years ago, having been adequately trained in the building industry, I had reached a point where I needed to come out from under the shadow of my supervisor. And so I was sent. My task was to go to the site of a house we were going to built, and set up the profiles to begin the job. The orders of the day were;

1. check the number on the street side boundary peg.
2. Find the related peg at the back of the section
3. Double check; just in case I only thought I had it right.

² BOUCHARD, L. D., “Theological Perspective on Luke 24:44–53”, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A* (ed. D. L. BARTLETT – B. B. TAYLOR) (Louisville, KY 2010) II, 514.

4. Stretch a line between those and establish the position of the planned house in relation to the boundary
5. Go back to the plans and double check the lot number for the section and then sight the boundary once more.

With all these tasks completed, I could be reasonably certain that in fact, I was on the right piece of land. It was presumably safe to now complete the set up of the profiles.

The point of this story, is that I was no longer just looking up into the clouds, (watching someone else actually doing the job.) Moving on and building something new was now my responsibility. So it should be with our vision of the ascension. We are not a people of faith, gathered for the purpose of watching someone else doing the missionary task. Additionally, just as the disciples were told that they would receive a helper then so will we. We are promised The Paraclete; The Holy Spirit. Once again, this gift is not something received by looking up into the clouds and waiting for something to happen. By the grace of God, we are called to service in God's name. When we embrace the gifts given, they grow and the whole community is edified.

Thus Ascension Day is about celebrating God's gift of reconciliation. We learn to be the people through whom this gift will be shared with others.

Ross Downes Ascension Day 2022