

---

## ***Gazing up at the Clouds (Ascension Sunday 2019)***

***Acts: 1-11; Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53***

***A sermon preached by Vicar Andy Hanawalt at Paradise Lutheran Church on 06/02/2019***

---

Those of you who came to Craig Memorial's inaugural Ascension Day Service here in our Paradise Lutheran Sanctuary this last Thursday night were treated to a different sort of liturgy briefly summing up the the drama of Christ's Death, Resurrection, and Ascension: We *began* by celebrating holy communion to commemorate Christ's Death, then I gave a short meditation on the resurrection, and Pastor Andrew from Craig Memorial followed that up with his own meditation on the Ascension.

I've got to say that I was relieved when I found out that that was the order of service and that *it was him—not me*—who had to talk about Jesus' Ascension.

You see, the Ascension of Jesus is one of the more difficult things for a pastor in today's world to preach about. It ranks right up there in popularity with preaching Trinity Sunday—another notoriously difficult day to preach. But these two topics—the Ascension and the Trinity are difficult to preach about for *very* different reasons.

The Holy Trinity is a mystery sitting at the absolute center of our faith, and it's just *really hard to talk about* in any way that doesn't oversimplify, obscure, or even falsify it. So when it comes to the Trinity, most preachers—and more than a few pretty smart theologians—tend to agree with the famous quote from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: "*Whereof one cannot speak, thereof must one be silent.*"

It's these difficulties—the poverty of language when it comes to the deep and enduring mysteries of faith—that motivate Eastern Orthodox Christians to rely on icons as much as language in their approach to our shared religion.

With the Ascension though, for modern, “sophisticated” Christians—the problem can be almost the opposite. It's not that it's hard to talk about; the

biblical accounts in Luke and Acts are pretty straightforward. But their interpretation is difficult and the story itself can make our faith sound a bit like a fairy tale—a bit “primitive,” a bit “embarrassing” in light of all we know now from science, modern physics, and space travel.

We have here a description of Jesus floating up into the air lifted on a cloud while his disciples watch him disappear . . . up into the sky, where they assumed “heaven” to be.

Turn ahead in your bulletin to page 6 and have a good look at the picture there. It might be a little dark to make out at first, but this is a picture of a stained glass window showing the disciples all gazing up to the sky looking at Jesus feet disappearing into the clouds.

Versions of this scene—with the Jesus's feet up at the very top, poking down through the clouds—*are in Churches and cathedrals all across Europe and even in America.* And when you read today's readings, and then look at pictures like this, as a preacher you can just get filled with dread. . . . ***what in the world do I say about that?***

It's no wonder that the most successful Ascension Day sermons focus on the two men in white from Acts 1:10-11 . . . Messengers from God who refocus the disciples' attention from staring up into the sky back down onto to the world around them and the job that Jesus left for them:

**“Men of Galilee, they say “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”**

And maybe it is best to focus on the practical when there doesn't seem to be much else helpful or enlightening to say about the theology of the passage.

But if you want a preacher with his feet firmly planted on the ground and who's always focused on the practical and reasonable . . . *well, that's just not me.*

You see folks, as far as I can tell, all the *best* things about Christianity: Catholic or Protestant, Western or Eastern, Conservative or Progressive, *are stubbornly impractical and utterly unreasonable.*

From the perspective of modernity, there's nothing practical or reasonable about God becoming man.

There's nothing practical or reasonable about a selfless love that suffers and dies for a humanity that couldn't deserve it less.

There's nothing practical or reasonable about the story of a man dying and three days later emerging from the grave claiming to have defeated the power of death itself.

And there's nothing practical or reasonable about the Ascension narratives.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that we should all think about the ascension in an overly literal way. And I'm definitely not saying heaven is "out there" in space somewhere. And I certainly *don't* believe that Jesus shot up into space as if he'd invented the world's first jet pack.

But maybe we shouldn't always be too quick to turn the message of the ascension into a simple fable telling us that Jesus has given us all job to do, that we are to be his hands and his feet in the world, and that we should stop gazing up into the clouds.

Sometimes gazing up into the clouds, filled with wonder and faith, just soaking up the mystery—the beauty—is what makes life worth living. **And maybe Ascension Sunday is the day more than any other on the Church calendar that challenges us to lean into our faith, to lean into the idea that maybe, just maybe, we really don't need to always *understand everything*.**

One of things I learned studying philosophy in college is something that in hindsight should have just been obvious, but we don't always think about it this way: ***That if something is true, it's just as true whether I believe it to be true or not. That a truth is utterly unaffected by my ability to perceive it, to prove it, or to even conceptualize it.***

And that's where the a lot of the anxiety about the ascension comes from I think. Somewhere along the way in the last 500 years, there was a shift in our culture and way of understanding the world:

We stopped seeing ourselves as characters with small parts in *God's*

grand drama and started to see God as a character in *our* grand drama.

And so the Church has so busied with remaining an “important” player in the drama of modern humanity, that it's lost much of what made it such a unique body of people. We've so busied ourselves with staying “useful,” so busied ourselves with staying “integrated into a modern scientific worldview,” so busied ourselves with being “relevant”—that in much of the world it's hard to differentiate us from other social-service providers, social clubs, and organizations out there “getting stuff done.”

Again, don't get me wrong, none of these are bad things in themselves; but they should always take a backseat to the *mystery*, the *beauty*, the *love*, and the *wonder* that sits at the heart of who we are as a people.

So let's maybe *not* spend this ascension day too focused on the practical message to keep our feet on the ground and our eyes and our efforts focused on the here and now.

This ascension day, let's instead allow our minds and hearts to range over the vast and nearly incomprehensible *beauty*, *mystery*, *paradox*, and *majesty* at the heart of our faith.

Let's maybe today *not* get hung up on strategy, mission, and the relentless pursuit of relevance and usefulness.

Let's allow ourselves instead to *engage with God's story*, without worrying about how it might fit into a modern worldview where humanity, not God is the measure of all that is useful, true, and worthy of our our attention.

Let's think about what the story of the Ascension might mean on those terms. And if it helps you to imagine feet disappearing into the clouds—so be it.

Before our culture started to think of humanity as the measure of all things, before we started to fret so much about what in the Bible was to be taken literally and what was symbolic—back when these distinctions could bleed into one another, **back when we acknowledged that our *identity* came from the story of God and that we would only ever see and truly understand a small part of that story during our lifetimes**—back in those times, Ascension Day was considered to be one of the four main feasts of the church—along with Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost.

You see, for the early Church, **Christianity wasn't really about heaven and hell and which of these places we would all eventually end up in forever.**

It turned into that in the middle ages, but **the Christianity of the early Church was really about God bringing heaven—God's realm of infinite love, peace, welcome, and celebration—into the physical world of space, time, and matter—a place ruled by greed, violence, self-regard, and conflict together.**

It was about God patiently and wisely overcoming all the poverty, all the sin, and all the selfishness that we could create as obstacles to this *marriage of heaven and Earth*.

**It was about God bringing his kingdom to life “on Earth as in Heaven.”**

And that's what made the Incarnation, Cross, and Resurrection so meaningful in the first place. It's God beginning this process.

The life of Heaven has come into the world with the Incarnation, reconciled an alienated humanity with the Cross, and shattered decay and death with the Resurrection.

**In the Ascension, the risen Christ then brings true humanity back up into heaven and into the life of the trinity, into the life of God.**

The relevant image isn't of Jesus as some super-human God Man—shooting up off into space and way beyond the blue. . . **It's of the “son of man” which can also be translated as “the human one” ascending a throne to sit at the right hand of God.**

It's the flip-side of the incarnation . it's humanity entering into God just as the incarnation was God entering into humanity. It's God drawing the reality of heaven and earth ever closer together. It's a step toward “the great day when all will be one” that we're gonna sing about a little later in our new hymn of praise and celebration: “*We are called.*”

And next week at Pentecost we'll celebrate yet another step toward the

marriage of heaven and Earth; when God sends forth his spirit to dwell in our hearts and our lives, making each of us individually—and the Church as a single corporate body—into a living temple, a place where heaven and earth come together.

Maybe after that day will be a good time for us to take our eyes off the sky, and think about strategic goals, our mission, and how to live out our discipleship in today's world drawing on the power of God through the Holy Spirit.

But today let's just gaze up at the clouds for awhile in amazement and wonder, let's marvel at the beauty of all that God has done, is doing, and will do. Let's just praise and worship our God!

**AMEN**