

MAY 9 or 12, 2013: ASCENSION OF JESUS

Acts 1:1-11 Ephesians 1:17-23 Luke 24:46-53

To say the least, Luke's version of Jesus' ascension creates problems. He's the only evangelist who describes a definite departure of Jesus from the earth. (To put it in our terms: Jesus changes his zip code.) Luke's two gospel predecessors, Mark and Matthew, end their writings with the risen Jesus somehow still "out there" among us. Leaving out the 12 verses tacked on to Mark's original gospel, neither mentions a resurrection. Even John, whose Jesus ascends to the Father on Easter Sunday, returns to the disciples' upper room later that evening, and again a week later. Eventually he follows his disciples back to Galilee, appearing to seven of them while they're fishing, helping them haul in a miraculous catch of fish, and even prepares breakfast for them.

Luke actually seems to narrate two separate ascensions: one at the end of his gospel; the other, at the beginning of Acts. The first seems to be, like John's, a temporary departure; the second a permanent leaving.

Because of these contradictions, we're obviously dealing more with theology when we discuss Jesus' ascension than with actual history.

This ascension theology comes through clearly in today's second reading from Ephesians. The disciple of Paul responsible for this particular letter is trying to show his community the significance of everything Jesus did: his whole ministry, culminated by his dying and rising. It isn't that God simply resuscitated the historical Jesus. The risen Jesus is among us in a completely different form.

God, who has worked in Jesus, and raised him from the dead, continues that work by "... seating him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he puts all things beneath his feet and gives him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way."

In our gospel pericope, Luke's Jesus shares his/her risen uniqueness with his followers. "Behold," he promises, "I am sending the promise of my Father upon you" What Jesus once did, his disciples will continue to do. The Spirit will see to that.

Luke's emphasis on the presence of Jesus' Spirit in the community seems also to be behind his Acts narrative of Jesus' definitive ascension. From that point on, people who wish to imitate Jesus' faith must be instructed in that faith not by Jesus, but by one of his followers who is empowered by the Spirit. Paul's conversion gives us a great example of this process. Though the risen Jesus personally appears to him on the road to Damascus, Paul still must receive instruction and baptism from Ananias before his conversion is complete. (Couldn't Jesus have finished the job himself before Paul ever went through the Damascus city gate?)

Luke's Jesus really means it when he proclaims, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Besides giving us the geographic outline of Acts, the evangelist is also presuming Jesus' followers are now taking over Jesus' ministry. In a theological sense, Luke must "get rid" of him before they can step in and do his work.

If we look at today's feast as just one final step in Jesus' ministry, we're really missing the part we play in that ministry. It's now our faith that people are expected to imitate; our lifestyle that people are expected to copy.

Knowing this, perhaps it would be better for some of us if Jesus never ascended.

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MAY 12, 2013: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 7:55-60 Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20 John 17:20-26

The various authors of the Christian Scriptures present us with various beliefs about Jesus' second coming.

As we know from Paul's early letters, Jesus' first followers expected his Parousia to be just around the corner. No one thought he or she would have to imitate Jesus' dying and rising for more than a few years before the risen Jesus would arrive triumphant and transform the whole universe into a new creation.

We especially hear that theology in today's Revelation passage. Suffering a severe persecution, the author's readers can only hope Jesus will quickly arrive and turn the table on their oppressors. "Behold," Jesus promises, "I am coming soon. I bring with me the recompense I will give to all according to their deeds." The end of our pericope is also the end of the book of Revelation: "The one who gives this testimony says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" For the persecuted, Jesus' Parousia is "a long time a comin."

On the other hand, Luke doesn't expect Jesus' return in his lifetime. Writing in the mid-80s, he's the first author of the Christian Scriptures to be convinced he'll live his entire life, die a natural death, and Jesus will still not have come back. That's why today's Acts pericope is so significant.

For Luke, Stephen isn't just the first Christian martyr; he's the first Christian to die. Notice what happens immediately before he "falls asleep." "Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" He doesn't have to pass time in the grave, as Paul had earlier thought, waiting for Jesus' return before he experiences the new life Jesus promised. Jesus is coming for him right here and now. Luke is convinced that each Christian, at the moment of death, experiences his or her personal Parousia. (That's also why Luke's Jesus could promise the good thief on Golgotha, "This day you will be with me in paradise." In other words, "You won't have to wait until I return before you get into heaven.")

John carries this concept one step further. He believes in "realized eschatology." He's convinced that what we're looking forward to taking place "at the end" - in Greek, the "eschatos" - is actually taking place right here and now. We don't even have to wait until we die to experience Jesus' Parousia; it's happening in our lives today. Many biblical theologians refer to realized eschatology as "already, but not yet." We're already experiencing it, but not yet in the same way we'll experience it in the future. It's just as important to reflect on what God's doing now as it is to trust in what God's going to do later.

Today's gospel passage provides us with John's reason for believing Jesus has already returned. He's convinced that those who believe in Jesus are already completely one with Jesus. Listen carefully to his Last Supper prayer for his followers. "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us . . ."

Hearing today's three readings, we realize the earliest followers of Jesus must have been very adaptable. They didn't instantly throw in the towel when things didn't go as planned. They simply fell back on their deep faith in Jesus, convinced he'd always be one with them, no matter the changing circumstances. Of course, that kind of faith can only be present in those who really believe they're other Christs.