

Ascension 2009

Acts 1:1-:11

Today we celebrate the feast of the Ascension. I always at least partially dread having to preach or teach on the Ascension. That's because most people who think they understand the Ascension of Christ, don't. I realized how much I had misunderstood the Ascension for the first time I had to lead a bible study on this topic and was forced to completely rethink what I thought I already understood.

So to explain the Ascension correctly first I have to get people to realize how confused they should be as they think about this and then I have to try to take that confusion away.

Most people who think about the Ascension think about something like this; Jesus could heal crippled people, feed thousands with a few loaves and fishes, raise Lazarus from the dead, cure leprosy, and he rose from the dead himself, so sure, he could raise himself up into the sky and disappear behind a cloud.

It's easiest to understand the Ascension as just being about Jesus going beyond the laws of nature and doing something miraculous which shows his power.

It's easiest to understand the Ascension this way, but to understand it in this way is to almost completely miss what is really going on.

So when the Ascension occurred, what was really going on?

In our first reading we heard "When he (Jesus) had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight." (Acts 1:9)

We have every reason to believe that his is an accurate description of what the Apostles saw, but this image can mislead us into thinking that the Ascension is just about rocketman Jesus disappearing from sight.

But there's a lot more than that going on. If that was all that happened then if someone had a helicopter, not that there were a lot of those sitting around in Israel in the 1st century, then they could have hovered on the other side of the cloud and after Jesus had ascended been able to say "Look there he is, he's just hiding on the other side of the cloud."

But, the Ascension is not about Jesus playing some aerial game of hide and seek, that would certainly be an interesting trick, but God was doing something a lot more important than that.

The Ascension shows us that after his resurrection the very nature of Jesus' body was changed.

On several occasions after the resurrection Jesus appeared out of nowhere and/or disappeared from sight. (See Luke 24:30-:31, John 20:19-:20, and John 20:26)

When Jesus rose from the dead he did not just return to the ordinary experience of human physical reality which was his before the resurrection, his body was transformed and glorified so that while it was still a real physical body; his wounds could be felt (John 20:27-:28) and he ate with his disciples (John 21:7-:13), it was not like the body he had before his resurrection or that we have now.

So at the Ascension Jesus did not just levitate above the ground, he somehow disappeared from sight without ceasing to have a physical body.

This helps us to see that a little bit more was going on at the Ascension than we might have otherwise thought.

And that might lead to thoughts like, well isn't it cool that Jesus got to do that, I guess when you're God that's what happens to you when you die and then come back from the dead. But what Jesus experienced is not something meant just for him. The Ascension helps us to see what is in store for all of us.

When we say the Nicene Creed at mass we conclude with the words "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen." That reference to the resurrection of the dead is not about Christ's resurrection, because by the time we get to the last line of the Creed we've already talked about Christ's resurrection. That is a reference to the final resurrection of the dead at the end of time, when everyone who has ever lived, will rise from the dead.

In the Gospel of John Jesus said "the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out." (John 5:28-:29)

So Jesus is saying that at some point, a point in history that we obviously haven't reached yet, everyone who has ever died will come out of their tombs. Jesus is not just talking about souls and spirits, he is talking about people with bodies.

Christ is not the only person who gets to rise from the dead with a transformed body that can appear out of nowhere and disappear from sight, someday everyone is going to do this.

Our eternity, whether we spend that eternity in Heaven or in Hell, is going to be an eternity where we have a spirit, a soul, a mind, and a body.

In the post-resurrection body of Jesus Christ, the glory of which was shown at the Ascension and on other occasions after his death and resurrection, we get some hints of what this will be like.

Now it's impossible to fully answer every question that surrounds this idea. Obviously many of those who have died have decayed to the point where there is nothing left of their body. Does that mean that they don't get to share in this, that only those who have large enough chunks of their original bodies remaining at the end of history get to rise from the dead?

No, of course not. I'm not sure how God is going to take care of that, but he's God I think we can trust that he will.

So hopefully I've confused you, and then shown you how this confusion leads to asking questions which themselves lead to a greater understanding.

May all of us recognize that the Ascension is not about rocketman Jesus, it is about the glorified body of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead being displayed, and it is about us being given a foretaste of what awaits all those who die united to Jesus Christ, and are able to share with him in eternal glory, a glory that is both spiritual and physical.