

## **Sermon for Ascension Day – All Saints Millington 2023**

### **Sister Monica Clare**

Today we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. The actual official feast day of the Ascension was this past Thursday, as it always occurs 40 days after the resurrection, but we and many other parishes have transferred it to today so that we can celebrate together at church.

It's very easy to get caught up in the particulars of the story of the Ascension. What exactly happened? What did the disciples see? Did Jesus actually levitate off the ground like we see in Renaissance paintings? Did he glow with a blinding light like he did at the Transfiguration? If we were to re-create Christ's Ascension with special effects, what would it look like?

Unfortunately, we don't know. We don't have very many details in these brief descriptions from Luke and Acts. Both accounts were presumably written by the same author, and all we get from him is that Jesus was lifted up, a cloud took him out of the disciples' sight, and he was carried up to heaven.

In Acts, there are two men in white robes who appear and try to explain things, but their explanation only further confuses the people on the scene. The two men in white say: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

If I had been there, I probably would have said “Yeah ok that’s great but – can you explain to us exactly what just happened?”

It's impossible for us to know. These accounts in Luke and Acts are the only descriptions of this event. The other Gospels do not provide any further details or explanation and so, we must do the very uncomfortable but extremely Episcopalian thing of sitting in the mystery. The particulars of the Ascension are not revealed to us. We can only bring it to our prayers and our meditations and imagine.

We can also take our focus off the WHAT of the Ascension and place it instead on the WHY. Why did this incredible event take place? Ancient writers didn't concentrate on the journalistic, historical, or scientific details of their stories. They concentrated instead on the meaning. This story is given to us so that we can ponder it in our hearts and ask God – what does it mean to me?

Jesus' ascension into heaven occurs after a series of post-resurrection events which astonished and invigorated his followers who had thought all was lost when he was crucified. Before this event, there were many thrilling encounters with the risen Jesus that reminded the disciples that even though Jesus died, he was not gone forever. He was with them. They didn't know how long he would be with them, though, and they had no idea what he was going to do next. He tries, as he did before his crucifixion, to tell them what was going to happen, but they cannot understand.

In Acts, they ask him “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” and he replies “It is not for you to know the times or 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.” And I’m sure the disciples were like “Wait, what? We thought you were here to get rid of the Romans!”

In Luke, Jesus tries to tell them that they will be “clothed with power from on high.” We know now of course that he was describing the day of Pentecost, which occurs in our calendar 10 days after the Ascension. It was a day when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples and empowered them to spread Jesus’ message throughout the world, as he said.

With our hindsight, we can see the “why” of this miraculous story. We can read the musings of great theologians and listen to sermons and know the reason that Jesus was taken up to heaven in a cloud. Our collects for this day tell us that “Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things.” and that he “ascended into heaven, so we may also in heart and mind there ascend, and with him continually dwell.” We know in our hearts that Christ went to heaven to sit at the right hand of God and rule over the whole earth, and we believe that in that moment of his returning to God, he showed us the way that we will travel someday.

The disciples didn't know exactly what was happening or why, and yet they still believed and followed. Just as in our lives, we do not know what will happen next and we often don't realize why it has happened until long after the event has occurred, the disciples simply trusted that Jesus knew what he was doing.

Jesus' ascension shows us that when we trust in God's plan for us and we follow in his ways, we will be empowered to do great things. It tells us that the God who triumphed over death and reigns over the whole earth has never left us, and He never will. No matter what happens here on earth, we are not alone.

After the crucifixion, Jesus did not leave us. After the resurrection, Jesus did not leave us. After his ascension into heaven, Jesus still did not leave us. Jesus, "according to his promise, abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages." Forever and ever. Amen.