



## *Ascension Sunday*

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*Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 28:16-20*

Believing is seeing, and faith is understanding. Knowing in our bones what kind of world this is, discovering the secret, unearthing the clue, this is essential to real life, to life lived in depth, what we call eternal life. If this is so, it means faith arises from observation, from contemplation, it is all about looking, about paying close attention, taking time to ponder the beauty and mystery and majesty of the world. Yet we never do this alone and unaided, as if each individual is left to their own devices. We stand on the shoulders of those who go before us, we do so within communities of insight and interpretation, by entering into the stories of faith handed down and handed on to us. Today, forty days into Easter, we Christians contemplate the Ascension of the crucified and raised Lord into heaven, a far more sophisticated story than at first it might seem. For here is a story of fact and faith, of ending and beginning, of absence and presence.

Just as a matter of bare fact, we know that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was seen and heard and touched by only a handful of people. If those who did see and hear and touch are to be believed, to be with him in Galilee and Jerusalem was to find yourself nearer God than anywhere else, to find yourself more fully alive than ever before. When he looked at you it was a terrifying experience, because you were seen and seen through, but then there was the joy of knowing yourself loved and welcomed, forgiven and accepted. His touch brought healing from sickness and life to the dead.

Clearly, it was a wonderful time, a unique encounter, but of course all this had to end; it could not simply go on and on for ever. For whatever else we say of Jesus of Nazareth, he is first and foremost a real human being, like us in every way, finite and mortal just like the rest of us. Like every one of us, he belongs to a particular time and place, limited to a moment in history disappearing very fast into the past. The thirty years or so of incarnation, of God enfleshed in this faithful and courageous Jewish man, have a beginning and an end. From conception to death, Jesus is one of us; as we say, "from the warmth of Mary's womb to the stillness of the grave". Indeed, even beyond the grave, for all the Easter stories attest that he continued appearing to his friends, radically changed to be sure, yet also radically the same somehow.

Then, at some point, we don't know quite when, these resurrection appearances cease. Luke tidies all this up a bit, giving it the nice round biblical number of forty days. In other words, the resurrection appearances end when they are meant to end, when it is time to move to another level. The Ascension is seen a turning-point and a cut-off point, a moment when one door closes

and another opens. So today we are faced with an ending and a new beginning, taking us beyond matters of fact, bringing us into the realm of faith, faith which introduces a whole new world and a whole new set of facts. For the physical absence of Jesus is the prelude to a whole new set of presences, just as commonplace, just as matter of fact, just as real, but apprehended now by faith, apprehended by those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Once upon a time a few thousand people saw Jesus. Now he is seen by people of every race and language and nation. Once he spoke to a few dozen people, at most to a few hundred at a time. Today, in gatherings just like this one, in houses and fields and office buildings, in parish churches and cathedrals large and small, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, his voice is heard and hearts are moved.

This is eternal life - this very ordinary and yet quite extraordinary knowing and loving, gathered up and gathered together as we are by someone who is plainly not just any historical figure like Plato or St Paul or Michelangelo or Queen Victoria. He who today and everyday opens the scriptures for us does not belong to the pastness of the past. We are ourselves witnesses that he is the living and contemporary Word behind and beyond all the ancient words of the sacred text. He comes to us in the pages of the Bible, yes of course he does, but never just as one of many two-dimensional figures in black and white. He steps right out of the pages of the book, taking his place in our midst, addressing us directly, wherever two or three or three hundred or three thousand are gathered together. He baptizes us into his own way of life, immersing us in the waters of rebirth. He anoints our heads with oil, crowning this dust with glory. He spreads a table in our sight, providing bread enough and more than enough for all who are hungry, a cup of blessing running over in super abundance. In deepest fear and darkest loneliness he comes as courage and hope, as friendship and light, saving us from ourselves, redeeming our failure. Again and again and again, the absent one turns out to be really and truly and substantially present, using your eyes, or my hands, our tears and our laughter. The confined incarnation, God's bodily presence in Jesus, is confined no longer. Jesus is simply and supremely the focusing of God, the burning glass under the noonday sun, the prism revealing all the colours of the rainbow. What we see and touch in him in that time and place long ago, can now be seen and touched in every place and every person. And not just in saints, but in sinners, and not just in holy places, but in any place at all.

So it is not for us to stand gazing up into heaven, expecting to find God somewhere else. Ascension is not primarily about absence but about presence, it is fact and faith, both ending and beginning. Our task as God's Easter people, as people of the ascended Christ, is to see God's will done on earth as in heaven, to seek Christ and serve Christ and be Christ here and now.

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