



At A Distance – Sunday After Ascension Day

Exaltation

“Exaltation: a state of extreme happiness, being elevated in rank, power or character, being praised highly.”

Greetings Saints and welcome to our 7th Sunday after Easter worship. Today, we celebrate the “ascension” of Jesus into Heaven. Jesus’ ascension has been the subject of much rigorous debate across the broad spectrum of Christian theological thought since the 3rd Century. The Ascension of Jesus has been called both “the linchpin of the Christian Message” and “a theological embarrassment” and everything in between by the broad spectrum of Christian thinkers over the years. Often, we struggle to wrap our minds and our faith around this “magical event” that has Jesus swooped up bodily into a heavenly realm above, reflecting an 1st Century, 3-layered cosmology that most modern Christians view as ancient mythology. While Ascension Thursday continues to be celebrated by the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox religious faith traditions, many Christians simply choose to ignore The Ascension completely because of this difficulty of making sense of this event in some modern context. So Blessed Ones, let’s have a look at Jesus’ Ascension and see if we can find some common ground that makes sense for us and for our Jesus Way Walk today.

One reason for the many and diverse conversations around Jesus’ Ascension event is because the chronology of the event itself is different depending on which gospel author you are reading. In Mark’s original gospel, the first of the Gospels to be written, there was no mention of the Ascension at all. This Gospel is unique in that it has a “second ending” that was added much later by another writer that does discuss the Ascension event. Matthew’s Gospel does not speak of the Ascension at all, choosing to end his story with The Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations....” Authors Luke and John both have

the Ascension event occurring on Easter Sunday afternoon. It is only in the Acts of the Apostles (written later by the author we know as Luke) do we see the Ascension occurring 40 days after Easter. So, as you can see, we have some early discrepancies to work through even from our earliest written sources. The Gospels of Mark and Matthew, the two gospels written closest to the time of Jesus' public ministry are silent on the Ascension. John and Luke, have it occurring on Easter Sunday afternoon and only in Acts does the Ascension event occur 40 days later. Then we seem to have a second writer going back to "update" the original Mark story to fit more closely with John, Luke and Acts.

So, while early Gospel writers can't seem to get the timing right, what about the Ascension event itself. Is it real and meant to be taken literally? Or symbolic, allegorical or a parable for us to interpret somehow? How to view the Ascension event, as a parable or as a historical reality was the cause of lively debate as early as the 3rd Century, and that debate still is ongoing in the 21st century as well. One of the early Church Fathers, Origen, believed that Jesus' ascension was of the mind and not the body...was symbolic and metaphorical and not literal. Another Church Father Irenaeus taught in the literal, and historical ascension of Jesus' physical body into Heaven. The Council of Nicaea in 335 CE adopted the creedal statement that we still say today, The Nicene Creed. In the Nicene Creed the council seems to have reached a tenuous theological middle ground; "splitting the baby" in a beautifully political and Solomon-like consensus statement. In the Nicene Creed we simply say, "*he ascended into heaven... [Period!] ...and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*" And so, the debate continues even today.

From a literary and historical perspective, the ascension story was a very common literary form in Jesus' time. In Greco-Roman writing, ascension equated to "deification" of a noteworthy person who was the subject of the story usually a hero who travels to the underworld, braving all sorts of challenges and tests and rises after acquiring, special knowledge and skills. A human being made a heavenly being in order to learn and execute cosmic and divine secrets and to be honored and rewarded in an extraordinary way. Roman Emperor Augustus, Romulus – The Founder of Rome and the Greek hero Hercules among others, were all said to have "ascended into heaven."

For early Jewish writers, ascension stories were common as well. Ascension into heaven was indicative of “Divine Approval” and the list of Old Testament characters who “ascended into Heaven” is long: Enoch, Ezra, Baruch, Levi, Elijah, Moses, and Job’s Children to name a few. These ascension stories were inspired by a three tiered “cosmology” of how these early writers viewed the universe. Earth in the middle, heaven above and some nether world, Hades, below.

And so for the 1st century, Christian apologist writers of the Gospels, it was most likely imperative that their “hero” Jesus be ascended into heaven being both deified for the potential Greco-Roman/Gentile converts and recognized as having “divine approval” like the other great Jewish cultural and religious heroes for the potential Jewish converts. As the “idea” of who Jesus was, Jesus’ Christology, began to evolve over time so does the writing around the Ascension of Jesus evolve as well.

For me Saints, the Ascension Story, like much of the Jesus Way story is full of meaning, parables, spiritual puzzles, symbolism, and allegory that we can uncover and use for us today walking our spiritual paths in the 21st Century rather than the 1st Century. We always say to one another, “Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s People.” We all get to hear the messages in the Sacred Stories in our own way and wrapped in our own personal context. Spirit takes care of that for us, individualizing and customizing the message to be “just what we need” at this particular point in time.

For me Saints, there is no more powerful message than the Ascension. For me, the Ascension is the powerful conclusion of Jesus Public Ministry and a strong symbol of the “New Relationship,” the “New Covenant” between Jesus and God, and between God and us. The Ascension symbolizes for Jesus not only the end of His earthly ministry but also the end of his human limitations. Jesus has been “exalted” by Creator God to be both the “new High Priest” (a Jewish symbol) and the “mediator of the New Covenant” (a Christian title).

But what does this Exaltation Christology look like, how is Jesus’ Nature changing over time? This is the question that Exaltation Christology seeks to answer. This way of thinking about Jesus’ Nature is one of the earliest and therefore one of the closest to our “primitive” Christian roots. The Exaltation of Jesus, his transition from human being to heavenly being, has three parts.

- Jesus Public Ministry, Crucifixion and Death is the first.
- Jesus' Resurrection is the second.
- Jesus' Ascension is the third.

An Exaltation Christology timeline sounds something like this:

The first phase of Jesus "exaltation" begins with Jesus Public Ministry, Crucifixion and Death. Jesus begins his public ministry with his Vision Quest, his 40-day preparation and time of contemplation in the Desert. Next Jesus answers the call of His Vision Quest, leads by example by what He has learned there and is baptized by John the Baptist. In that act of obedience, in that moment, Jesus is first exalted by Creator God ("this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!") and the Sacrament of Baptism is created. Exaltation theologians tell us that through this first "exaltation," his Baptism, Jesus received miracle working powers. Jesus public ministry continues for 3 years, teaching, preaching and instituting the Sacrament of the Table, ending tragically with his Crucifixion and Death. But here Jesus is "exalted" a second time. Jesus is Resurrected, visits the Disciples and conveys the power to forgive sins and confers on them the Power of the Holy Spirit. And finally, in the third act of "exaltation," Jesus transition from human being to heavenly being is completed in humanity's ascent to the Divine in the Ascension. Creator God's final transitional and transformational act for Jesus and for us.

Saints, each of the parts of Jesus's and our Exaltational transformation needs the others, they cannot act or work independently of one another. Christians who ignore the Ascension leave the Jesus Way Story "conclusion-less." The Resurrection is not enough. We are a Resurrection people, yes and more. We are Trinitarians: Jesus Ministry and Death, Jesus Resurrection, Jesus' Ascension! In this trilogy our new relationship with our God through Jesus is defined and a pathway for a new covenant and relationship with our God is recreated and renewed. We are exalted by our Baptism, just as Jesus was, when and where we say yes to the Vision that Creator God has offered us. We are exalted by Walking the Jesus Way, faithfully executing our public ministry of living and dying, of successes and failures. Living our daily lives with courage, dignity and honor...our personal resurrection. And we are exalted yet again at our ascension into a loving and enduring covenant and relationship with our God, just as Jesus was.

And now Saints, I have given you a lot to think about today. I hope that that our time together this morning helps you see the Ascension not as a “theological embarrassment” as some have said, but as a critical, symbolic piece of -- or exhalative and transformational spiritual journey to -- our God.

Now Saints, I want to leave you with one final thought today. At the Ascension, Jesus promises to come and be with us again. This promise is being kept, right here and right now. This promise that Jesus is speaking of is not some apocalyptic coming again of the Son of Man on the last days. Jesus’ presence coming again that He speaks of is right now and repeats and repeats and repeats as often as we choose it to. How do we know this is true? I know this is true because I can experience this Presence personally two ways: through the Holy Spirit and through the Holy Eucharist. We hear and receive the Echo of the Ascension at Pentecost. And we hear and receive the echo of the Ascension at the Holy Eucharist each time we rehear Jesus promise, “Whenever you do this, I will be with you.”