

THE PARKDALE MESSENGER

Weekly news and musings from
the little church moved by a Great Spirit

Toronto, ON

May 18th, 2012

No. 121

WORSHIP THIS WEEK

THE ASCENSION

"We, who are many, are one"

Sermon: Rev. Dan Benson

Scripture:

Psalm 1

Acts: 1: 15 – 17, 21 – 26

John 17: 6 – 19

CALENDAR

Tuesday, May 22th – (7:00 pm) PUC council meeting.

Saturday, June 2nd – (6:30 pm) An Evening of Dining & Dancing.

Thursdays – (7:15 pm) Beavers meet.

Knifty Knitters – (10:00 am) Meet 2nd Saturday of the month.

❖ REFLECTIONS

Where's Jesus?

By Richard J. Vincent (2008) - www.theocentric.com -

Both the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are written by the same author. When considered together, these two works comprise more actual space in the New Testament than all the remaining books combined. Together, they form one epic story told in two acts.

It is noteworthy that the ascension of Jesus is the hinge on which this two-volume work turns. The ascension appears at the end of the Gospel according to Luke (Luke 24:50-53) and is found at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:2, 9). Thus, according to the two-volume work of Luke/Acts, the ascension is the climax of the story of Jesus and the key to understanding the church. The ascension effectively connects the story of Jesus with the story of the church.

The early church recognized the significance of the ascension. It is found in every major creed. The risen Jesus now sits in a position of authority ("the Father's right hand"). With Jesus at the Father's right hand, we can never

think of God in the same way again, that is, apart from Jesus. The church's earliest creed compresses all these truths in the simple statement: "Jesus is Lord."

Where's Jesus?

The first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles uses two phrases to describe the ascension: Jesus was "taken up into heaven" (Acts 1:2); "he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9).

Where is Jesus? The short answer: Heaven.

Unfortunately, our preconceptions of heaven get in the way of understanding what the early church meant in its confession of Jesus' ascension.

Too often, we focus on the question: Where is heaven? A better question is: What is heaven?

When the early church confessed that Jesus had ascended into heaven, the emphasis was not so much on a place - the emphasis was on God's immediate presence.

The church was confessing that Jesus had entered into the divine glory - that the risen Jesus now dwelt in the immediate presence of God. This may explain the meaning of the phrase, "a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). Oftentimes in scripture, a cloud represents the *shekinah* glory of God, the sign of God's presence (cf. Exo. 33:7-11; Mark 9:7).

Far too often we think of heaven exclusively in spatial terms - that it is a place somewhere far beyond.

We must shift our thinking to consider heaven in relational terms. "Basically, heaven and earth in biblical cosmology are not two different locations within the same continuum of space or matter. They are two different dimensions of God's good creation."

Christians never believed "Jesus had gone to a 'place' we could locate if only we had the right visual equipment."

The point in the Acts of the Apostles is not that the risen Jesus is "somewhere in a galaxy, far, far away" but that the risen Jesus continues to work on this earth in the church and through the Spirit. Christians believed that the risen Jesus who dwelt in the immediate presence of God was - because of this - everywhere accessible.

Heaven relates to earth tangentially so that the one who is in heaven can be present simultaneously anywhere and everywhere on earth: the ascension therefore means that



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Jesus is available, accessible, without people having to travel to a particular spot on the earth to find him.

The "New Physics" of the Ascension

If we stretch our imagination and human language to the furthest extent possible, we may begin to grapple with "the new physics" of the ascension. The possibility of other transcendent dimensions is no longer the stuff of science fiction, but of legitimate scientific theory. What if we considered heaven as a dimension that can touch our present experience rather than a place far, far away? This is exactly what the early church believed in regard to the ascension.

It is the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus that makes this contact possible. These acts of God span the gap between humanity and deity. In Jesus - the Word-made-flesh - God fully shares in our humanity, bearing our sin, in order to raise humanity to the heights of divine glory.

Now, a human fully shares in the divine life and love, making it possible for us to do the same. We are united to this human, Christ Jesus, through the Spirit. It is "in Christ we have access to the Father through the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:18). Our salvation, therefore, depends upon our continuing union with the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit -a continuing union made possible by Jesus' ascension. The distance between God and humanity is fully and finally spanned in Christ!

We are united to Christ through the Holy Spirit. In the Holy Spirit, the distance between us and Christ is collapsed. The Spirit unites us with Christ in the "heavenly places" (see Ephesians 1:3; 2:6; Colossians 3:1-3). This collapsing and transcending impacts our entire experience in the realms of time, space, and matter:

In the Spirit, time is collapsed in that we presently possess eternal life, although we await its full experience at the consummation. In the Spirit, space is collapsed in that the presence of the risen Christ is available everywhere, although we await the time when we will see him face to face.

Where is the Church?

Because the risen Jesus inhabits a glorified human body, he is not everywhere. However, because he has ascended into the heavens -the immediate presence of God- he is everywhere accessible.

With this knowledge, the question is no longer, "Where is Jesus?" The question is, "Where is the church in its relation to the ascended Lord?"

Jesus is alive and continues his kingdom work in the church through the Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles is a record of

the continued mission of the risen Christ through the Spirit-empowered church. By beginning with Jesus' ascension, Luke wants us to know that Jesus is still alive and still at work - here and now! The church derives its primary identity and mission from its ongoing relationship with the risen and ascended Lord.

The good news is not only that Christ died, was buried, and rose again. The good news is that the risen Jesus is alive, present among us through the Spirit. Jesus is truly our Immanuel -God with us. Christ stands with us as we take up his kingdom mission, proclaiming and living as his witnesses.

We must never forget this. It is easy to fall into the error of believing that because the Lord is not visible, he is not present -that we are on our own. But the truth is that Christ is present here today. He is alive. He is the head of the church. This is his church -Christ's church. It's not my church or your church. We must answer to Christ, and seek to faithfully follow him in all things.

To this end, Gerrit Dawson provides a wonderful reflection on Hebrews 2:11-13: So in worship, we may visualize Jesus standing in the midst of our sanctuary. His arms are outstretched and his head is raised to heaven. He has gathered us all and he is offering us to his Father even as he offers his praise. In our congregation, his congregation, Jesus sings to his Father: "Father, here I am. Here with the children. The family you gave me. Father, here I am! Within the gathered church I will lead your praise. To my brothers and sisters I will make you known. Father, here I am!"

This means that in the midst of every sanctuary, Jesus is leading our praise. In the tiniest church in the remotest region to the grandest cathedral in the heart of the city, Jesus is worshipping his Father, bringing his brothers and sisters with him into the presence of God.

❖ IN THE NEWS

Miss Penny needs your help!

Please help Miss Penny and the Knifty Knitters, to send our kids to Camp next summer.

❖ THANK YOU TO

- Ernie Wilmot for the flowers for the altar table.
- All those who support our small food bank!

For information or if you want to post something in The Parkdale Messenger, please contact us:

parkdale.messenger@rogers.com

* [Image "The Ascension" by Brian Jekel]