

ASCENSION SUNDAY

Luke 24:50-51

What are we to do with this account of Jesus going up to heaven? His disciples watch stunned and amazed. It was hard for them and us, to grasp.

For the early Christians, the ascension of Jesus into heaven was no problem, and was widely celebrated. The early Christians had no problem in recognizing that Jesus was God and that after His humiliation and suffering to accomplish forgiveness and salvation, the grand conclusion to His work was to be seated at the right side of the Father in heaven.

For the early Christians, the Ascension meant that Jesus ascended so that He could be the ruler of the universe and that included earth and especially the church. For people in that time, heaven and earth weren't totally separate places.

Our modern thinking is quite different. There is a lot of talk about Jesus being a companion and friend, but the divinity of Jesus, that he is God and rules over all things, that all things and all people are subject to Him, that is a subject that most people outside the church think is all a bit too weird.

Just as the early Christians had difficulty talking to the culture they lived in about the humanity of Jesus, we have difficulty talking about the divinity of Jesus to the culture in which we live. To the world which has no appreciation of the divine, this going "up", this leaving makes no sense at all.

So, what are we to do with this account of Jesus going up to heaven? Well, first, we need to get it out of our head that where

Jesus went to a completely different faraway place. The New Testament writers tell us that Jesus' ascension ushered in a new age that will end when Jesus comes again. It's hard to find the right words to describe what this means. There is a mystery about it, and is difficult to explain in a few sentences, however, here goes.

In this new age, the old has not yet completely disappeared, and the new has not completely come. It is a time when heaven and earth cross over. Those who have died "in Christ" are in the heavenly world, and those living "in Christ" now on this earth, can also share in the blessings of the heavenly realm. In a mysterious way the heavenly world overlaps our earthly world.

We are already citizens of the heavenly world. So on the day when Jesus ascended to heaven, He wasn't going away at all.

He was entering a new dimension of His existence so that He could be with every one of us at the same time, no matter what part of the world we might be in, or what kind of dangers we might be experiencing.

There is another part of the ascension of Jesus that is mostly lost to modern day thinking, and that is, when Jesus ascended to heaven He was covered with a cloud. To the early Christians this would have been a powerful picture. In the Bible, a cloud often represents the holy, intimate presence of God. Whether it was the cloud leading the people of Israel through the wilderness, or the cloud that descended on Mt Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments, or the cloud that covered Jesus and the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration and the disciples heard God's voice, Jesus being surrounded by a cloud indicated that Jesus was entering the eternal presence of God.

He and God are one and the same. He is seated at the right side of the heavenly throne. He has all the authority and the power

of the divine, and at the same time rules with meekness, peace, love, humility and strength. Jesus is God and is available to all people, at all times, and in all places. Yes, He can be with every one of us always, even to the end of the age.

Jesus going “up” to heaven doesn’t mean that he is watching us from afar, uninvolved in what is happening in our lives, and perhaps getting involved only when He feels inclined to do so.

“Up” in the ascension story doesn’t mean far away or disconnected with what is happening in our lives. He has entered the heavenly world that is connected to our lives since we have been joined to Christ’s death and resurrection and has raised us up with Him.

What does Christ’s ascension mean for us today? Jesus invites us to trust Him and we have every reason to accept that invitation. He will never let us down. His love for us is totally reliable. His help in times of trouble is guaranteed. His comfort in times of grief and anxiety is unfailing. His forgiveness for guilt stricken consciences is never failing. His presence and strength when everything is getting too much and all too heavy is a certainty. His ear is always ready to listen to our prayers.

Tragedies will happen to us and those we love. People will trick us and take us down. There will be those who will misjudge our compassion for weakness; use us and treat us as a sucker. There will be times of sickness and grief. But our Saviour will be there for us and with us. He has the power and authority over all things and even though we might like things to turn out differently to the way we have prayed, be certain that we can trust His love.

Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords and the supreme ruler over the universe, but He is still the one who comes to us in the simple bread and wine of Holy Communion. He still

comes and gives us His body and blood, and as we do that, we have a sense of the connection of the heavenly world with our lives. We have in our hands the body and blood of the supreme ruler of the universe who becomes part of us, and we are joined to Him as we eat and drink. In His body and blood we are reminded that His power is available to us at any time.

The ascended Jesus is closer to each of us than we realize most of the time. He will never let us down, and especially on that day when we take our final breath, He will take us from here to the heavenly realm where we join all those who have gone before us.

In the meantime He has given us, His church, a job. He says, "Be my witnesses". Tell one and all to trust Jesus, to love and follow Him, so that all may come to know Christ, and be raised with Him to rule with Him in the heavenly world.

Jesus is our living Lord who makes a difference in our lives and empowers us to make a difference in the world.

AMEN.