

Where Is Jesus?

A sermon by David A. Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton, NC
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Acts 1:6-14

1 Peter 4: 12-14; 5:6-11

This Bible reading from the beginning of Acts describes the Ascension. In the Church calendar this day is celebrated forty days after Easter – last Thursday – and ten days before Pentecost. Jesus ascends into heaven, leaving the disciples wondering where he went.

Where is Jesus? Is he up in the air somewhere? Or is he in the bread and wine on the table? Or is he in heaven seated at the right hand of God? Or is he everywhere?

In one way or another the answer to all of these questions is, yes. Then again, in one way or another, the answer to all of them is no also. Yes and no. Just where is Jesus?

There are those who belittle the claims of Scripture saying that the Bible reflects a premodern, unscientific world-view to which we can no longer subscribe. The last hundred years of theology are filled with people suggesting that we cannot be enslaved to a particular world-view; these are usually people enslaved to a modern, scientific, rationalist world-view. They suggest that because we no longer share the same science as the ancients, therefore we do not need to believe anything they said. And that is an error.

The ancient world-view understood heaven to be “up there,” above us. Jesus when he ascended literally went up until he got there. Our astronomical explorations have led us to believe that is not the case. Where did Jesus go? To the presence of God. Where is that physically? We can’t say; it may not be accurate to say it is a physical place in this universe so much as it is a realm beyond this creation. So while the idea that Jesus went up until he got somewhere is probably not accurate, it is accurate to say that he went away, into the presence of God. The text says he went up until he was taken away in a cloud: the cloud in Scripture is often the “hidden presence” of God. God is here, but not here. God is here, but not seen. God is with us, but all we see is Jesus disappearing in a cloud. Such is the mystery of God's presence.

Our Presbyterian ancestor John Calvin understood the primary church holidays to be Christmas, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. To us, Pentecost is minor, and Ascension unknown. But it was once held in high importance. The Ascension was important because of the question it posed: where is Jesus? This became an issue at the Reformation. In many respects, the Reformation in the early sixteenth century was a transition from the medieval science based on Aristotle to a new kind of science, a new way of understanding knowledge, that had been developing for about three hundred years. Many of the theological conflicts of the Reformers with the Roman Church can be understood that way. In this case, those opposing views led to disagreement over how to understand the ascension. Quite literally, the question was, Where is Jesus? If Jesus rose

into the sky and ascended bodily to the right hand of the Father, then Jesus is there, wherever that is. If that is true, then how can we say that the bread of the Eucharist is Christ's Body?

That may not seem like much of an issue to you, because you have been reared in the answers given by the Reformers. But at that time, these were serious, vital questions, for which people were willing to fight and die. The Roman Church at the end of the Middle Ages was committed to a doctrine of transubstantiation, which says that in the Eucharist, during the prayers, the bread literally becomes Christ's body, Christ's flesh. Of course, it still looks and tastes like bread, but that is a happy consequence of Aristotle's physics, (the details of which I will spare you unless you ask.) The Reformers said that this was not true, because the body of Christ is in heaven at the right hand of the Father.

In what sense is Christ present in the Eucharist then? In what sense can we say that Jesus is present in our day to day lives? These are the questions that result from this debate. The answer that was given by John Calvin in the Presbyterian side of the debate is that Christ is present in the Eucharist spiritually, not physically in any sense. In the bread and wine, in the prayers, in the communion of the people, Christ meets us spiritually, feeding us, and giving us grace. As we come to the table, we find Christ waiting to meet us.

In a broader sense, how is Jesus present in our day to day lives? We typically say, "God is everywhere" and believe that wherever we are, there Jesus is. But again, if Jesus is ascended into heaven... how can he be here? The answer is that Jesus is present through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God present with us, and through the Spirit we experience the presence of Christ Jesus. A fully Trinitarian faith worships the Father through the Son by the power of the Spirit. That is how we can say Jesus is present with us, and yet with the Father also.

That is why perhaps these questions seem a little strange to us. The notion of Christ's spiritual presence in the Eucharist and in our lives is what we have been taught; it is hard to conceive that anyone could believe differently. But people did, and so the Ascension became an issue.

What are the "benefits," as Calvin calls them, of Christ's ascension? There are several. First, Christ has "opened the way into heaven" which had been closed since Adam and Eve's sin. Further, Calvin says, "since he entered heaven in our flesh, as if in our name, it follows, as the apostle says, that in a sense we already "sit with God in heavenly places in him" [Ephesians 2:6] so that we do not await heaven with a bare hope, but in our Head already possess it." Christ has gone ahead of us into God's presence, but "in him" we are already there, and can look forward to the reality of it.

A second benefit is that Christ is our advocate and intercessor in the Father's court. Calvin puts it this way: "he turns the Father's eyes to his own righteousness to avert his gaze from our sins." We come before the throne of God in confidence not fear, knowing that Christ is with us, on our side, pleading on our behalf.

The third benefit is Christ's own power. Having ascended into glory, he “sits on high, transfusing us with his power, that he may quicken us to spiritual life, sanctify us by his Spirit, adorn his church with divers gifts of his grace, keep us safe from all harm by his protection, restrain the raging enemies of his cross and of our salvation by the strength of his hand, and finally hold all power in heaven and on earth.” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, xvi, 16)

So Christ takes us with him in the flesh to heaven, gives us grace, and rules over us and in us in power, by the Spirit. In Jesus we find comfort, hope, and mercy. In Jesus we find love, but love that has a purpose and a goal, love that has a power for living, love that gives us life. These are the benefits. Where is Jesus? He is ascended into heaven!

That means God is with us as we go about our lives. Here we turn to 1 Peter, who tells us to “cast all our anxiety upon Him.” Now, graduates, you know about anxiety! You have just completed four years of college, three of which were interrupted in various ways by the Covid pandemic. You no sooner got moved in than it was time to move back home. How would you manage your school work? How would you balance time at home and time spent studying? How could you visit the library when it is closed? What if you get Covid real bad — what if you can’t finish the semester? What if you die? All of these things cause anxiety! I think that is all great training for the rest of your life, by the way, because there will always be the “what if” questions.

Peter admonishes us to cast our anxiety on Jesus. When we are afraid or worried about something, the thing to do is give it up to him. That can be hard to do — if we keep thinking about these things. Anxiety is basically a fear of the possibilities of the future; if we knew what was going to happen, we could deal with it. Since we don’t know, we are lost in anxiety. We have to identify our fears, and ask if they are realistic? We can slowly sort through the possibilities until we see which ones are really something to fear. And we cast that on Jesus — he will take care of us.

Peter also says we should humble ourselves — and that too is hard. You have just come out of college, where everyone is graded on their achievement. There is a sort of competition at college, but now suddenly, you are all equal, and if I may say it, viewed as equally stupid. Just another dumb kid starting out. The last thing you want to do is humble yourself, but you need to! As you begin your career, admit the things you don’t know; someone will help you. Don’t try to be the know-it-all! That is good advice for all of us, by the way.

Well graduates, I am glad I am not in your shoes! You have to navigate a new world, very different from the one that faced me forty years ago — but you will do it, day by day, and step by step, and you will succeed if you remember that Jesus is with you. Where is Jesus? He is with you — no matter what comes.

The thing to remember is that God is with us all the time, in all places, in all circumstances, in all our needs and problems, in all our joys and sorrows. Where is Jesus? He is ascended into heaven and so is with us in power.

Thanks be to God. Amen.