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Ascension in Fragments (Acts 1. 1-11)

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The more I preach, the more I realise that part of the art is letting the word of Scripture suggest how it wants to be encountered, how it wants to be shared and broken open. When the text is gutsy, prophetic or dramatic, it invites an answering gutsiness and vulnerability from the preacher – not safe and distancing analysis. Where there's mystery, the tone of the sermon should evoke wonder; where there's questioning or confusion we should allow it to be sensed – not just speaking *about* it, but speaking from the same kind of place – tentatively, conscious of the difficulty of finding words. I have found this a comforting thought as I've contemplated preaching this week on the Ascension. The story itself is so fragmentary and unexplained, it licenses (I hope) a bit of fragmentation in the sermon!

The Ascension is for me perhaps the strangest bit of the whole gospel story. Luke the historian begins, seemingly conventionally: 'In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning' (so far so reasonable) ... 'until the day when he was taken up to heaven ...' (not quite so reasonable any more). We seem to have flipped without warning from the realm of history to the realm of myth. And the text doesn't get any easier to categorise. Luke mentions the 'convincing proofs' of resurrection presented over forty days. He reports the disciples' ongoing concern for the political restoration of Israel in the particular historical circumstances of the Roman occupation of Palestine, alongside the descent of a cloud to whisk Jesus up and out of their sight, and the sudden appearance of two men (aka angels) 'in white robes' offering commentary on it all.

What form of writing is this? What does this mixing of genres suggest about how we are to understand this text? What is a preacher to do? Well, as I've said, taking my lead from Luke's somewhat fractured account, I want to offer a reflection in three fragments – fragments that don't resolve the difficulties of the text, but highlight what it invites me, at least, to grapple with.

Fragment 1 is about the relationship between the material and spiritual dimensions of life. In Christian understanding these two domains can't neatly be separated. Whatever the spiritual life is, it's not an escape from *this* one. The work of salvation and reconciliation happens in our bodily lives, by means of bodily practices. It affects our relationships with people and the creation, how we think, feel and act, what we do with our time and resources. Spirituality is about the transformation of the whole human journey. That seems to me pretty straightforward and uncontroversial.

Christianity also affirms, however, something much more difficult. 'We' say that the possibility of transformation has been opened up in our ordinary, material world by the irruption of another reality. This happened in ages past – when 'God' called the people of Israel, gave the Law, and inspired the prophets. It happened again at a particular historical moment in first century Palestine. Christianity claims that the deeper human journey is revealed and made possible for us because the spiritual reality we name 'God' has entered our mundane life, has become matter.

We say this in various ways. God came down from heaven and was born in human form. The Son of God was crucified under Pontius Pilate and on the third day was raised from the dead. We also say that this historical episode of the divine life dwelling on earth in human form came, at a certain point, to an end. Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God. These are words at the edge of intelligibility; it's hard to know what we really think we're saying. And yet, in all this, the gospels purport to witness to a series of events. They are not just giving metaphorical, narrative clothing to a timeless truth. This insistence on the material

embodiment of spiritual reality seems to generate the strange interweaving of what sounds like history and what sounds like myth. It breaks our categories. Is it nonsense? Or is it a breakthrough into a much larger conception of the nature of things?

Fragment 2 is about the 'space' opened up for human being by Jesus' departure. Here, I am strongly reminded of the space that God generates in the creation story in Genesis. Remember that what God primarily does in the creation of the world is to make space. God separated light from dark, creating the temporal spaces of day and night; God separated the waters above the earth from the waters below, and created the domains of sky, earth and sea. And then God calls upon these spaces to bring forth and be fruitful: 'let the earth put forth vegetation; let the waters and the sky bring forth living creatures', and so on. God creates the conditions for fruitfulness; God encourages creation to participate in its own fulfilment.

In the same kind of way, Jesus' Ascension is understood by the gospels to create a kind of space for human living. It's opens up different possibilities from before, because it's a space now indelibly coloured by hope. The risen Jesus has undergone death and not been extinguished, he has been rejected and returned with forgiveness. Nothing can definitively separate us from the love of God, which means we are liberated from fear and for life in a whole new way. So it's a space now charged with the energy of the Spirit. To the extent we open ourselves to it, our lives are directly empowered by the life of God.

But as with the space-making of creation, what this new space for human living will bring forth is not pre-determined. In John's gospel Jesus tells his disciples that 'because I am going to the Father', you will do greater works than I do (John 14.12). Luke, in our passage, has Jesus say that the disciples will receive power to become his witnesses – that is to live out of the reality he has begun to bring about.

There's something about the Ascension, which is to do with enabling our more conscious participation in the fruitfulness and fulfilment of creation.

This leads, in turn, to Fragment 3. The Ascension is the culmination of the Incarnation – the whole life, death and resurrection of Jesus now internal to the life of God. And this is said to implicate not just Jesus but the rest of us: God became human so that human beings might become divine, Irenaeus says. But this vision of the open heaven, and of Jesus seated at the right hand of God (to use the traditional imagery), actually intensifies our awareness of our need for healing, and of the suffering of the world. It makes more acute our sense of the woundedness of things. Because we are given this vision of wholeness, we can no longer fail to recognise the depth of the world's alienation. Nor can we accustom ourselves to or be resigned to the suffering of this present time. In the light of this promised reconciliation, we are drawn to protest and longing. It generates our vocation to give ourselves for the world's transformation, as Jesus did. The vision of the open heaven returns us to the world.

So the strange, category transgressing story of the Ascension imagines our historical, finite, human lives set against the horizon of God's life. It imagines our lives potentially empowered directly by the energy of God's Spirit, suffering more acutely the world's alienation, participating more consciously in life's generation, liberation and fulfilment.

It's one way of imagining human life and its possibilities. Of course, there are others – many of which feel more immediately plausible. In the end, it seems to me, the truth of this way of imagining reality must be proved – tested – by the character of the lives it shapes. Are we finding ourselves more capable of hope? Is our integrity, our wholeness, being deepened, even as we give ourselves for the healing and empowerment of others? Sometimes it feels a fragmentary thing – the life, the imagination of faith. Even so, out of such fragments may we find ourselves gathered – to be for the blessing of all.