



BENEDICTUS
contemplative church

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Ascension – Let go of the past and receive it's blessing (Acts 1:6-14)

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Today we are celebrating the Ascension. It's the day we reflect on Jesus' final leaving of the disciples in the form that they were familiar with.

As we begin, I would like to situate the Ascension in the larger story of the Paschal Mystery ie the life, death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus. This mystery forms a central part of our faith, our worship and shapes the liturgical year. Clearly the founders of the church believed this to be important. Is it still important for us here in the twenty first century?

I would like to suggest that it is, that the paschal mystery discloses the Way. The way that Jesus came to show us how to live, the way of transformation, the fundamental reality animating all of creation. There are six moments in the Paschal mystery – Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Day, the 40 days, Ascension and Pentecost.

Each represent a place on the journey of transformation and forms an on-going cycle. As a spiritual director I meet people at different points on this journey and accompany them along the Way. Let's start at the end which is also the beginning...

Good Friday	Death, name your deaths (marriage break up, theological understandings, who God is, gender identity, sexuality, illness, actual death, job loss...)	Disintegration (often the time when people begin spiritual direction)
Holy Saturday	Loss of hope, everything dead, waiting, dark night	Desert/dark night (chaos)
Easter Day	Resurrection, new life (green down on the earth after rain, after a bushfire)	Gift/new vision
40 Days	Experimentation, grieve what's lost, adjust to new reality	Experimentation (Liminal space)
Ascension	Letting go of the past, receiving its blessing	Reintegration
Pentecost	Embrace the spirit of the new life you are in fact, living	Wholeness

This journey can be applied individually and corporately. We can find this cycle lived out in all of creation. It's like a blueprint, built into the fabric of life.

Jesus lived it fully and the early founders of the church recognised the importance of understanding and remembering this wisdom, thus it forms the centrepiece of the liturgical year.

In this Paschal Mystery often the 40 days and the Ascension are not really considered and yet they are an essential part of the process. I'd like to focus on them for the remainder of my reflection.

So what was happening during this time?

- Jesus had been with them as a human person
- During the time between the resurrection and the ascension, Jesus had been getting them used to experiencing Him in a different way – “now you see me, now you don't”
- During this time, he was still the Jesus that they knew but at the same time different....
- After the resurrection, the disciples were overjoyed – Jesus was alive, the whole thing was back on track, their hopes were restored, Jesus would lead them and Israel would be restored....
- Jesus was still trying to get through to them that he was about something different, right up to His leaving...
- And then He's gone...

I'd like to use an icon to help us reflect on the meaning of the Ascension. This icon is a way in which the church has imagined this event not so much as a photographic portrayal but more a spiritual illustration. An icon is more like a window than an artwork. We gaze through the icon to encounter God and God gazes through the icon to encounter us.

The Ascension icon shows Christ in a Mandorla or sacred space, with angels, being escorted to Heaven while his Mother Mary stands with angels and the faithful disciples. Notice that Jesus is smaller than Mary and the disciples.

Notice too, that the bottom half of the icon holds confusion and uncertainty. It is a representation of church; not an historical depiction, but theological One. The focus of the lower part of the icon is the Theotokos, the God bearer, Mary. She looks straight at us and ask us; How are you going to bear the divine in this world? The disciples are all over the place. Some look up, some look to Mary, some look to each other.

They are in an in-between time, a liminal space. They need to let go of the physical presence of Jesus so they can receive the blessing of the ascending Christ.

As we can see, there are two distinct parts to the story.

1. Jesus leaving
2. Disciples left

Let's reflect on Jesus leaving first.

- Jesus said that it was to the disciple's advantage that He go away in John 16:7
- How can this be? How is it better for Jesus not to be with them? Just imagine what the disciples were thinking and feeling....
- In fact the days after the resurrection were schooling the disciples in recognising Jesus in different ways... it was changing their perception from a flesh and blood human Jesus to something else...

- Someone whom it took a while to recognise even for those who loved Him most like Mary Magdalene. So He was different somehow.
- And we hold John 16:7 together with the end of Matthew where Jesus says “Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
- So He’s leaving and staying???. How do we understand this?

I suggest that it is more helpful to think of Jesus as receding or fading rather than leaving. The icon suggests this in the relative size of the two parts of the picture. Jesus, up in the cloud surrounded by angels, is smaller than the group of disciples below.

- He didn’t so much leave as change the way He was present, OR He left, so He could be present in a different way.
- The angels are trying to encourage the disciples to remember how Jesus had been training them to recognise Him in the past 40 days and saying; “He’ll come again”.
- He’ll come again and again in the same mysterious way He kept showing up and disappearing in the last 40 days.
- You won’t see Him with your eyes anymore, you’ll recognise Him with your hearts.
- And this is indeed how we have been recognising Him ever since.

As Rowan Williams says: *“Jesus hasn’t just gone away. He has gone deeper into the heart of reality — our reality and God’s. He has become far more than a visible friend and companion; he has shown himself to be the very centre of our life, the source of our loving energy in the world and the source of our prayerful, trustful waiting on God.”*

The continuing challenge of the Ascension is to be like the disciples and let our fixed image of Jesus go. We need to be in the dance of holding on and letting go, so we can continually discover the more, the depth, the mystery of the Risen Christ.

I’d like to conclude this reflection, by coming back to the Paschal Mystery, this cycle of life. We have experienced a death, we’ve sat in the dark chaotic mess until a new vision has emerged, a new idea, a new way to live, a sense of hope reborn, new, small and fragile though it may be.

And now we find ourselves in this liminal space (this 40 days). We have a sense of something new, some new possibility for life and at the same time, we long for what was before, how things used to be, how we used to be (healthy, young, certain, on top of our game etc etc). We experiment with how life could be now, what might work for us and most importantly, we grieve. We lament what we no longer have or are.

Finally, we come to a resting place where we can open our hands and let go of the past we have been clinging to. Remember Mary Magdalene, on Easter Day, in her joy of recognition, she took hold of Jesus and he said “Don’t cling to me”. I think that must have been the hardest thing for Mary to do but she got it, she let go.

The Ascension invites us to let go of whatever it is that is holding us back from stepping fully into the new life that God is offering. With empty hands we can receive the blessing of what went before.

Stay
A Blessing for Ascension Day

I know how your mind
rushes ahead
trying to fathom
what could follow this.
What will you do,
where will you go,
how will you live?

You will want
to outrun the grief.
You will want
to keep turning
toward the horizon,
watching for what was lost
to come back,
to return to you
and never leave again.

For now
hear me when I say
all you need to do
is to still yourself
is to turn toward one another
is to stay.

Wait
and see what comes
to fill
the gaping hole
in your chest.
Wait with your hands
open to receive
what could never come
except to what is empty and
hollow.

You cannot know it now,
cannot even imagine
what lies ahead,
but I tell you
the day is coming
when breath will fill your lungs
as it never has before
and with your own ears
you will hear words
coming to you new and startling.
You will dream dreams
and you will see

the world ablaze with blessing.

Wait for it.

Still yourself.

Stay. —Jan Richardson