

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 21 May 2023
Ascension Sunday - Year A

1st Reading: *Acts 1:1-11*

Psalm: *47*

2nd Reading: *Ephesians 1:15-23*

Gospel: *Luke 24:44-53*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Did you ever try to describe something you had seen or experienced, but couldn't quite find the right words, and you thought afterwards: I don't think they got it. I guess you had to be there.

A few weeks ago, Coral and I were able to watch a spectacular display of Northern Lights. Where we live in the Galena Territory, there aren't any street lights, and if we walk up the road to the top of the hill above where our house is, there aren't many trees, either, so the entire panorama of the sky is opened up to view. We had read that there had been a major solar storm a few days previously, so on this particular night, the particles from that storm would be hitting the upper atmosphere of the earth, and there would be an unusually good display of these ionized particles, producing the phenomenon of the aurora borealis - the Northern Lights.

And they were correct. I've never seen such a breathtaking night of Northern Lights. But how can I describe what this whole experience is like to someone who may never have seen them at all? They don't really look like what you see in photos or films of them. They are much more subtle in colour and not as bright as one might expect. But, they can cover the entire sky, entirely encompassing you in a way that pictures can never hope to convey. And they are real, not just an image on a screen or on paper. I guess you had to be there.

I suspect that the apostles felt like this after they had seen Jesus ascend into heaven. What had they actually seen and how could they hope to describe it to anyone who hadn't been there? The few words Luke used to tell of that event seem inadequate, even though he actually makes two different attempts, both of which we read this morning, one at the end of his Gospel, and then a recap as he begins Volume Two of his epic history of Jesus and the church, the Acts of the Apostles. In his Gospel he writes: "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven" - not really a description at all of what the disciples saw, but a statement of what the event really meant.

Then at the beginning of Acts, Luke writes: "As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." What exactly does that mean? I guess you had to be there.

I'm sure the disciples tried their best to describe to others just what they had seen, and I'm sure they struggled to find the right words to try to explain it, *and* I expect we each have our own mental image of what this event may have looked like. The other times Jesus had shown himself to the disciples after his Resurrection, he seems to have appeared and disappeared into thin air, but this time there was something different about it, that Jesus was "withdrawing" so that they understood that they would never see him in the same way again. He had completed the phase of his earthly life and had "ascended to the Father". He had gone to heaven.

But where is heaven? It isn't really a place, it is beyond our universe, another realm, another dimension? That may be the best way for us to think about heaven these days, as another realm. Except that realms and dimensions are still parts of our universe, and heaven is something entirely different altogether. And how can you get there from here? Well, it seems that you may be able to get there in a variety of ways.

I have mentioned the *Chronicles of Narnia* from time to time, a fantastic series of children's books written by one of the greatest Christian authors of the twentieth century, C.S. Lewis. In these books, certain children travel to the mystical realm of Narnia, where animals can talk, and where Aslan, the great lion, is the incarnation of Jesus. And in each of the seven books in the series, the children use different means to get from our world to the world of Narnia, but they can never just get there whenever they want to. In the first book, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, they find their way to Narnia through the back of an old Wardrobe in a spare room in an old house, but it isn't always there. If they *try* to get to Narnia, they just run into the back of the Wardrobe, but when the times come when they are *meant* to get to Narnia, the back of the Wardrobe is gone and they keep on walking farther and farther into a wood that is part of the land of Narnia. It is Aslan the lion, Jesus to you and me, who calls them there and enables them to travel there.

No examination of the Wardrobe would ever reveal the secret of how to get to Narnia. Just as there is no way to simply open a door from our world to get to heaven. Only Jesus, the real, physical, resurrected Jesus, can come and go as he wills, and only he can open the door for *us*, which he only does at the right times.

So what words can we use to describe Jesus being in heaven, seated at the right hand of God the Father? That in itself is an image - "seated at the right hand of the Father" - which is helpful for us to understand the relationship between the Father and the Son, and between God and ourselves, but it isn't a scientific definition of where heaven is or what it is like, and of course it isn't intended to be.

There are some scientists in recent times (certainly not all, but a few, and unfortunately a few prominent ones) who ridicule Christians and ridicule the Bible for thinking that Jesus lives in the sky, or out in space. But they are misunderstanding that using the word "sky" to mean "heaven" is simply using the most picturesque language we can find to express the expansiveness, the exalted nature, the glory of heaven.

We had a choice this morning of two different Psalms to read, so I want to include a few verses from the other one, Psalm 68, that we could have chosen. Listen for all the references to God in the sky that use this language to express the power of God, and then listen for how the Psalmist rejoices that even though God is vast and wonderful and exalted in the sky, he still cares for the lowly and the least among us:

⁴Sing to God, sing praises to God's name;
exalt the one who rides the clouds;
I AM is that name, rejoice before God!

⁵In your holy habitation, O God,
you are a father to orphans, defender of widows;

⁹You sent a bountiful rain, O God;
you restored your inheritance when it languished.

¹⁰Your people found their home in it;
in your goodness, O God, you have made provision for the poor.

³³You ride in the heavens, O God, in the ancient heavens;
you send forth your voice, your mighty voice.

³⁴Ascribe power to God,
whose majesty is over Israel; whose strength is in the skies.

³⁵How wonderful you are in your holy places, O God of Israel,
giving strength and power to your people! Blessed be God!

So what we are celebrating today is that Jesus, having finished his mission on earth, has gone beyond the limitations of being in one place on this earth, and has ascended to the Father in heaven and is seated at his right hand in glory, however we might want to visualise that. As I said in a previous sermon, when Jesus was on the earth he was only in one place at one time, but now that he is with the Father, he can be with each one of us, and with all other Christians in the world, now and always, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. But that's another story, and we'll have to wait till next week to hear about that, just as the apostles also had to wait.

In the meantime, we praise our risen and ascended Lord in glory.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

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