


# THE ASCENSION – ST NICOLAS’S, ABINGDON

9 May 2024



Acts 1.1–11 / Ephesians 1.15–23 / Luke 24.44–53

... far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

**W**ALLACE STEVENS WROTE A WELL-KNOWN POEM entitled ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.’ I do not propose to describe *thirteen* ways of looking at the Ascension of Christ, but only three... or four... or ... We’ll see.

First, we should probably remember that Jesus isn’t the only character in the Bible who ascends to heaven. Enoch the patriarch is reported not to have *died*, but to have *walked with God*, such that later generations describe his departure as having been ‘taken up’. Elijah ascended to heaven in the chariot of fire; and various other heroes Jewish and Roman and Greek were understood to have ascended to heaven. That’s not to suggest that every Tōm, Domitian, and Herodotus was taken up to heaven; but everyone *knew* that exceptional people, whom the gods favoured, could rise directly to heaven without the unpleasant necessity of a humble afterlife.

Second, the Ascension plays a necessary part in reckoning with Christ’s real *absence* from the subsequent chapters of the New Testament and indeed early church history. Not that Jesus was not present spiritually and sacramentally, of course; but the church had to talk about its state of affairs with people who could *not* see with their

eyes and *not* touch with their hands the resurrected Lord. Jesus remains off-stage, or behind a scrim, from now on. And how do we then account for his absence? Matthew and John simply avoid the question by closing with Jesus still among the disciples. Mark puts a bold face on it by closing with the tomb empty and the women witnesses keeping *shtum*. Luke won't tell us that he moved to Marseilles, nor can he suggest that he was buried as were our forebears — not Luke, who reminds readers *six times* in Acts that Jesus fulfilled God's promise that his Holy One would not see corruption. There's only one direction left for Jesus to go.

Third: Luke has to move Jesus off-stage not just because candour obliged him to, but also because so long as Jesus remains the centre of our attention, we won't observe and fully honour the Holy Spirit, who becomes the central agent of God's plans in the Book of Acts. As Jesus says in John's Gospel, 'It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.' The church teaches, firmly and consistently, that the Holy Spirit, who is one with the Father and the Son, remains active and effectual among us to this very day; Jesus's Ascension makes space in our imaginations for the Spirit to dwell with us, to encourage us, to stir us up, to empower us.

Fourth, the Ascension *consummates* God's vindication of Jesus. He might have died an innocent man, a victim of mistaken identity and mob violence. Some thought he died deservedly as a rebel and terrorist, and others thought that as a general troublemaker and public nuisance he had to be done away with. But God sent him to us, a holy and righteous human just as we once were holy and just, and in response to his teaching a way of grace, and mercy, and peace, we could not tolerate his disruptive intervention in the daily practical politics of mortal life.

As he died on the cross, tortured and executed at our hands for very human reasons, God signified Jesus's innocence by *refusing* Death its power over him. Instead, Luke shows us a Jesus *victorious* over death, not just by a remarkable recovery from near-fatal trauma, but by *rising bodily*, from Death itself, and then by ascending to the right hand of God. While one might have assumed that somebody who survived crucifixion was still the common criminal that the Empire had branded a seditious traitor — only a lucky survivor — the Ascension rebuts any shadow of doubt that this Jesus whom we crucified has been raised not simply from death but from the faintest trace of guilt, overcoming every possible instance of disgrace.

Finally: *Rising*.

Yes, Jesus was taken up to heaven as other holy and blameless people had been before him. Yes, he has to move on from regular earthly habitation. Yes, he makes room for the Holy Spirit to enter our lives. Yes, he ascends beyond accusation or suspicion to the very judgement seat on high. He *rises*, not consigned to an 'underworld' as in so many traditions around the world, but 'in the heavenly places' — the kinds of place it's *hard to get to*.

Rising takes *work*; *falling* is easy, you don't even have to try. It's proverbial: 'as easy as falling off a log.' It happens automatically, thanks to gravity. But this evening, on Ascension Day, Jesus calls us to *resist gravity*; he calls us to *rise*, to reach upward to our full height, whether merely physically or spiritually. Here in Abingdon Parish above all places, here in this church, we know that *rising* isn't a matter of feet and legs, but of matter of extending ourselves to show care for our neighbours, of taking risks to defend vulnerable sisters and brothers, of sacrificing comfort to make our friends more comfortable, of steering clear of power and prominence in favour of patience and humility —

*that's* what it means to rise! *Rise* from terrestrial practicality to heavenly generosity, from mundane security to celestial faith, from daily niceness to eternal holiness. In a temporal world where *everyone* falls, a world that is passing away, ruled by *gravity*, tonight Jesus calls us, every one of us, to enter the Easter joy of a love that *lifts us out* of this world and its cares — Jesus calls us to make room for the Holy Spirit, to follow him with the cross and *beyond* the cross, *beyond* death, beyond even *resurrection* to *rise* with him to the right hand of God.

In name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit —

**Amen**