

Otherwise, the reality of God would have overpowered everything. There would have been no freedom, no spontaneity, no choices, no distinct selves for God to relate to.

Creation, this midrash tells us, begins with an act of loving humility. Can our God really desire us so deeply as to draw back and make room for us? Can God really cherish our freedom so much that God would prefer to invite us, rather than compelling us, into relation? And to teach us by humble example what love looks like, on the other side of the divine-human looking glass, so that we might learn to bless one another, as God has blessed us?

The comings and goings between heaven and earth don't end with Jesus' ascension. Back in Jerusalem, it will be the disciples' turn to feel the Spirit of God descending on them, hot breaths of holy fire dancing over their heads, and to sense a strange new power surging within: power to preach and heal and share and welcome, as Jesus did when he was with them. When we celebrate that gift of the Spirit next week, in the festival of Pentecost, it will not be as some event from the church's ancient past, but as ever-present reality.

For now until the day we see Jesus face to face, *we* are to be the tear in the veil. We are to be the meeting place between earth and heaven; the hospitality of God, welcoming one another, making room for one another, respecting one another, delighting in one another. Entering into deepening relationships with one another and with God, until it is no longer possible to tell earth apart from heaven.

About thirty years after the close of Jesus' earthly ministry, but still decades before the earliest gospel was written down, the apostle Paul sent a letter of encouragement to a church in the Greek town of Philippi. The letter survived to be handed on; it is thought to be among the earliest texts in the New Testament. Older still is the fragment of an early Christian hymn which the letter contains. Paul must have learned it in church.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ [Paul writes], any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who,

*though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God.* (Phil 2.1–11)

Amen.



Making Room
a sermon preached at First Church in Cambridge, UCC
Ascension Sunday, May 28, 2006, 11:00 a.m.
Luke 24.44–53
by Kate Layzer

Ascension Sunday! You've been looking forward to it for weeks, haven't you? Or would have been if you knew what it was?

Ascension Day—officially last Thursday—is an ancient feast of the Christian church which falls 40 days after Easter. Forty days, according to the book of Acts, is how long Jesus' resurrection appearances lasted; after which, the story says, “as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Now you see him, now you don't.

It's a strange and mythical-sounding story, and for our modern ears, really kind of an embarrassment. It comes as no surprise to be told that the classic practical joke for Ascension Day involves pumping a large inflatable figure full of helium and releasing it just as the congregation exits the church. But I'm of the mind that if early Christians thought a tradition was important, we ought to at least inquire about why they thought so before we shrug it off. Who knows but there might be a helpful insight or two lurking beneath the hokey imagery.

Descriptions of comings and goings between heaven and earth aren't unique to Luke, of course. We need only think of the story of Abraham and his three divine visitors; of Moses and the burning bush; of Moses receiving the Torah on Sinai; of Elijah caught up to heaven in a chariot of fire. And angels. Lots of angels.

In the gospels, this ongoing concourse between heaven and earth takes a dramatic twist. “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved. . .’” (Mk 1.9–11) It's an image to give us all pause: The veil of separation between us and God torn apart—just as the veil of the temple separating the holy of holies from ordinary space will be torn in two at Jesus' death.

The heavens were torn open, and God came down. Now, in today's story, that movement of descent is answered by a movement of ascent. The shamed, degraded, tortured, executed, risen, triumphant Jesus, God's Beloved, “is carried up” out of sight to assume his full glory. Henceforth, the one who was judged by the world will himself become the world's judge, ruling from his place of honor at God's right hand.

Comings and goings. Stairways to heaven. Reality? or Imagination?

And why would we even need stairways? Why have an “upstairs” and a “downstairs” at all? Why not just one

big room, ranch-house style? Must we think about the divine-human relationship in terms of higher and lower, greater and lesser, more-powerful and less-powerful? Surely that only perpetuates the kind of hierarchical thinking that has been so damaging in human history, and which most of us would probably just as soon replace with a more collaborative model.

This question didn't much trouble the minds of our ancestors. They were used to hierarchies. But it does trouble many of us. The very idea of glorification sets alarm bells ringing in the fairness and justice centers of our brains. Future scientific studies will no doubt show that that particular area of the brain is greatly enlarged in people who find themselves drawn to the United Church of Christ, which could be one reason we don't often hear Ascension Day sermons preached in UCC churches. It's a favorite story of some of us old-timers that when a former pastor of this church suggested to the deacons that the festival of Ascension be revived at First Church, he was answered by sheer silence, and then the awful question: "*WHAT* is Ascension Day?" Whatever it was, it didn't sound very Congregational.

What is most troubling about the ascension of Jesus in the New Testament—or at least, most troubling to me—is the image it seems to present of an absconding Jesus. A Jesus who finally shakes the dust of earth, and the needs and sorrows of earth, off his sandals and turns his back on us, waving goodbye as he retires to the gated community of heaven, leaving the rest of us to struggle on without him. Did he not stop to ask himself, "What would Jesus do?" It's like watching a trusted friend and coworker get promoted to the corner office. You used to hang out together, eating pizza and talking about your lives. Now you're small fry, and he's at the CEO's desk, writing performance reviews. What happened to the Jesus we knew?

It's tempting to think of the Ascension like that. But if that were what was going on here, I don't think Luke would insist that the disciples returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives "with great joy."

The disciples' response, it seems to me, is key here. Luke tells us that when Jesus "withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven, they worshiped him." *Worshiped* him. Luke has never before used this word to describe the disciples' response to Jesus. Worship, as they knew very well, was for God alone—unless you were a pagan, which the disciples most decidedly were NOT. As faithful Jews, they would sooner have died than kneel down to a fellow human being.

Which is precisely the point. The ascension of Jesus is, at long last, the moment of recognition that has eluded the disciples all this time, through all those months and years on the road, wearing out shoe leather in the service of the gospel. They missed it in his suffering and death, too, and even, it seems, in his resurrection appearances. Only at the moment of his withdrawal into the "cloud" does the meaning of it all finally seem to register. Only then do his friends recognize who they've been dealing with; only then do they dare to take hold of the utterly astonishing insight that has surely been dawning on them bit by bit by bit. This Jesus is more than a mighty prophet and wonderworker. Somehow, in some way that strains all their categories to breaking, he is the divine presence itself, embodied.

Not as in, "Aha, a god in human form." That would be the Roman way of looking at it. You don't like the emperor's policies? Blasphemy! Don't you know he's a god? It was a pretty good way of maintaining order, back when there were no phones to wiretap. No, Jesus is not that kind of "god," although the Romans may have feared he was moving in that direction, when they crucified him for setting himself up as the emperor's rival. Jesus is something else altogether. We strain in vain for language that can express it. Emmanuel, we say: God-with-us. God's Son. The Eternal Word, the Logos. Or, waxing poetic, "The Second Person of the Trinity."

Those would be the church's terms; in this story, at that moment, there were no terms. So what did the disciples see on the Mount of Olives? That somehow, in the person of Jesus, their humanness had been taken into the heart of God, into God's very nature? The text is spare; it doesn't really tell us, and how could it? We're out of the realm of facts here and into the realm of mystical experience. By that I don't mean "making stuff up." I mean experiencing things that are so transcendently real that we have no language for them. We say, "He was taken up," but that doesn't really describe what happened, so much as it describes what the experience felt like. Today, we might say something like, "He went deeper." All we can say for sure was this was a God-moment. God-moments move us to worship, and joy. Only later do we begin reaching for words to try to say what it was like.

"He was blessing us, and suddenly there was this radiance, and it got brighter and brighter, and... it was glorious." "Glorious" is a word we hear a lot during Easter season. But what's it *like*? We know what it means in earthly terms. It means achievement, honor, status, admiration. It means the Red Sox in 2004. It means being lifted up and carried around to thunderous applause.

But what is glory like on *God's* side of the fence?

In a famous passage from Lewis Carroll's masterpiece *Through the Looking Glass*, the insufferable Humpty Dumpty proposes his own definition of glory. He has just been explaining to Alice the benefits of celebrating un-birthdays, pointing out that whereas we only get one day a year on which to receive birthday presents, there are three hundred and sixty-four days when we might get un-birthday presents. "*That's glory for you!*" he concludes triumphantly.

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,' " Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,' Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

Status. Gifts. Applause. Winning arguments. Mastery. Whatever our looking-glass world's definition of glory, I don't think it's what the disciples glimpsed on the Mount of Olives. Perhaps they saw Jesus' wounds when he lifted up his hands in blessing. Perhaps they saw his love for them shining in his face, and felt the joy of that love, flowing from God to Jesus, and from Jesus to us all.

You could view it as ironic that this point of recognition comes to the disciples at the very moment when Jesus vanishes from sight. Or you could see it as the expression of a profound truth: that to be in relationship with God is to have to do with absence. Necessary absence. Not abandonment by God. Not disengagement by God. But space. Distance. Hiddenness. Silence. Mystery.

Jewish tradition has it that when God was preparing to create the world, God first had pull back and make room. God had to make room because God was all there was. For creation to come into being and be free to grow and develop and be itself, God had to withdraw into Godself and make space for what was not God.