

Sermon May 5th Rev Jo Smith

Today's great miracle, of Jesus ascending into heaven, is one of a number of stories in Scripture that I find difficult to comprehend; hard to really get my mind around. Today's great miracle is one of them, but it's not the only one. How about Jonah being swallowed by a large fish? How did he survive that? How could he breathe in the belly of that fish for three days? Or how about Noah? How could he fit all of those animals on the ark? How did he keep the animals from killing or trampling each other? How could he feed them all?

Today we celebrate the miracle of the Ascension of Our Lord; and this is one of those stories that is hard for me to get my mind around. What does it mean that Jesus was "carried up into heaven"? How did this happen? And is Heaven really "up"? What does that mean? If we had a large enough telescope, could we look to the skies and actually see Heaven?

For me, this story is one of many stories in Scripture that I accept on faith – not because they make sense to me, or because I can figure them out – but because it is God's Word to me and I have learned to trust God's word with my heart even when my feeble human mind cannot wrap itself around the magnitude of the mystery that is God.

But, when you think about it, this isn't just true of the stories in Scripture. There are things all around our world that are difficult to comprehend, hard to get our minds around. For example, I am told that the galaxy we live in – the Milky Way – has somewhere between 100 and 400 billion stars, our sun

being one of them. That is a lot of stars. But I am also told that there are at least 200 billion galaxies in the visible universe. And that there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on all the earth's beaches.

That's really hard for me to get my mind around. And as if that's not amazing enough, the next time you are at the beach – or even at your sink – cup your hand and scoop up some water, and you will have in your hand far more molecules than there are stars in the visible universe and grains of sand in the world combined! And the empty space in those molecules is greater in volume than the volume of the particles that make up the molecules and atoms. That is to say all matter is made up of more empty space than atomic particles! That's really hard for me to get my mind around!

But here's the thing – I believe those numbers; at least I believe that they are good estimates. I trust the scientists who came up with these estimates, even though I don't actually know who they are.

So – and this is the point I am trying to make – if I trust some unknown scientists on this, why wouldn't I trust God whom I have known and seen at work in my life and the life of others? There are many miraculous stories in Scripture. And I don't understand them fully, That is, I don't know HOW but I don't have to – HOW is not a question of faith. If I give up on the HOW and I trust them, then once I have done that, then I can spend my time and energy thinking about what they mean for me, and for us, instead of trying to wrap my head around a mystery that my brain was never designed nor intended to grasp. I can think about the WHY? and WHAT NOW? And I can start to wrap my heart and my life around God's purposes and promises that are revealed such mysteries and miracles.

So, back to the miracle that happened on the 40th day after Jesus was raised from the dead, when he ascended into heaven. I believe this miracle, even if I can't understand it, so now I can spend my time and energy thinking about what it means for me, and for us, instead of how it happened. So, what does this miracle mean for us? It is an important miracle; an important event; and so, it is an important festival on our church calendar. But what does it mean that Jesus has ascended into Heaven? In my reading and pondering this week I found that it can be summed up in three words: Power, Promise, and Presence.

Power

First, the Ascension of our Lord tells us about Christ's power. As St. Paul puts it in our Second Reading:

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.

What does this mean? It means that Christ is in control of our world. Not any other rule or authority or power or dominion. Christ is more powerful than all of these, because he has ascended and sits at the right hand of the very throne of God. And this is good news.

Albert Einstein, a man who taught us as much about our universe as anyone, once suggested that the most important question in life, one that everyone should ask, is this: "Is the universe friendly?" One of the gifts of the Ascension to me – of really believing that our Lord has ascended and is sitting at God's right hand – is that we can answer that question with a definite 'yes': the

universe is friendly. Not universally....stupid pun...because yes, there are evil forces at work in the universe but the ultimate power in control of the universe is friendly. More than that it is Love itself. Evil cannot ultimately win.

Regardless of what is happening in our lives or in our world – and there is a lot which is evil happening in our lives and in our world right now – we know that our ascended Lord is in control and has not abandoned us. He is seated at God's right hand – far above all rule and authority – and intercedes for us. And He promises to come again soon to take full control of our world. There may be times now when we wish he would do a little more now, but that is not ultimately up to us. Instead, we are invited to trust Him, even when we don't understand His ways, even when we find it difficult to comprehend. We can talk to him about it – that's what prayer is, right? – but at the end of the day, we are invited to believe that God is in control.

Promise

And that brings me to promise. The Ascension is also about a very important promise. Jesus promises that we will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon us, so that we can be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. The power that Jesus is given in the Ascension is shared with us through the promised Holy Spirit. And that helps us to do what Jesus did while he was on earth. It helps us to continue his mission.

If we don't like what we see, in other words, we can do something about it; we are given the ability to make a difference. We are called to be his witnesses, to be sure. But we are also called to do what he did: to heal the sick and feed the hungry and fight oppression and evil, and to work for justice and peace, to seek reconciliation, and teach others to do these things, too.

Jesus tells us that we will perform greater works than he did after he gives us the Holy Spirit. Now, that's also a pretty difficult statement to get our minds around, too. But that's what Jesus says. And, when you think about it, we have. The church has fed more people, and healed more people, and shared the good news of the gospel with more people, than Jesus did while on earth. And that is because we have received the promised Holy Spirit.

Presence

And finally, along with power and promise, the Ascension is about Presence. Through the Ascension, Jesus actually becomes more present to us than he ever could before. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, and because he was fully human, Jesus was confined to the rules of this world – he could only be in one place at one time. He was the Son of God, but he was fully human. And so, he couldn't be everywhere at all times. He performed many miracles, but as we know, never the miracle of being in two places at once.

But after Jesus ascended into heaven, he could be present in a new way, through the Holy Spirit, and in fact he could be present everywhere at all times. I like how Martin Luther describes this, in a sermon he preached on the ascension in 1523:

What good will it do you if you merely preach that he ascended up to heaven and sits there with folded hands? ... For this purpose did he ascend up thither, that he might be down here, that he might fill all things and be everywhere present; which thing he could not do had he remained on earth.

The ascension, in other words, takes Jesus away from us, but only so that he can be present with us in a new way – filling all things and being everywhere present, in a way that he could not do had he remained on earth. And, yes:

This, too, is difficult to comprehend. But I believe it. I accept it on faith. And I rejoice that wherever I find myself, Jesus is with me; that he will never leave me. That is his promise. To you and to me.

Power, promise, and presence. These are all gifts of the Ascension. Difficult to comprehend, perhaps, but we are not expected to comprehend, only to believe. St. Augustine once said that:

God is not what you imagine or what you think you understand. If you understand, you have failed.

In other words, if you think that you have finally got your mind around God, then it's not God that you have gotten your mind around. God is beyond our comprehension, but not beyond our faith, not beyond our trust. And that is true of much of Scripture, including the Ascension. Miracles that we can't get our mind around, but that we accept in faith, and that bring joy to our hearts. The miracle of the Ascension brings joy to our hearts. Because it reminds us of Jesus' power, His promise, and His presence among us. May our belief in these things bring joy to our hearts, purpose to our lives, and praise to our lips. To the glory of God. Amen