

Luke 24 and Acts 1:6-11
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Rev. Kelley L. Becker

The story of Jesus' ascension is a good time to remind all of us that whenever we read these ancient texts, we make some interpretation decisions. Perhaps we start with the question: Are we going to interpret this text literally? Even people who choose to interpret the Bible literally are making an interpretation choice...don't let them tell you otherwise. Scholarship and science ought to inform that decision. The Bible is full of stories that are just not physically or historically possible. In other words, they are not factual, but that is not to say they don't contain some truth, some ways of guiding the way in which we live. So, if we aren't going to interpret the text literally, we need to know a little something about the world into which the text was written and perhaps what the author was trying to achieve in writing it. Who was the original audience? How would they have understood the story? And last, what truth can we glean from the story today? We, obviously, are not the original audience. We live in a world very different from the one in which the author of Luke wrote. For this text to mean anything to us, we need to find a way to interpret it that makes sense in this time and place. And sometimes, we must use our imaginations.

This is Luke 24: 36-53

³⁶...Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹Yet for all their joy they were still disbelieving and wondering, and he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

As I said earlier, this is the first time I have preached on the ascension story. When I realized that this week, I was glad I had chosen it. I, like a lot of you, enjoy the

opportunity to read and think new thoughts. This story requires us to use our imaginations...to imagine what it would be like if it was possible for someone who was dead to physically enjoy a meal with friends, for that person to talk to them, and then suddenly float away. This text screams, "I am a product of the author's imagination," perhaps with the help of rumors and stories that were already circulating. There isn't any reliable biblical scholarship that says Jesus was really scooped up into the sky to a place where God resides. And science would agree...there is, after all, gravity. Astrophysicist Carl Sagan once told biblical scholar John Shelby Spong that if Jesus ascended from the Earth at the speed of light 2000 years ago, he would still not have escaped our galaxy. It's like Jesus would be in astronomy's version of purgatory. That doesn't work for me.

Ascension in the real world would be more like the story of Larry Walters. I read this story first when it was told by a New Zealand preacher named Clay Nelson. The story began when Walters was 13 years old, and he saw weather balloons hanging from the ceiling of an Army & Navy surplus store. It was then that Larry knew that someday he would be carried up to the heavens by balloons. Sure enough, when he was 33 years old, on July 2nd, 1982, Larry Walters tied 42 helium-filled balloons to a lawn chair in the backyard of his girlfriend's house in San Pedro, California. With the help of his friends, Larry secured himself into the lawn chair that was anchored to the bumper of a friend's car by two nylon tethers. It is here that this story gives me Winnie the Pooh vibes.

Anyway, Larry packed several sandwiches and a six-pack of Miller Lite and loaded his pellet gun so that he could pop a few balloons when he was ready to come down. His goal was to sail across the desert and hopefully make it to the Rocky Mountains in a few days. But things didn't quite work out for Larry. When he cut the cord anchoring the lawn chair, the second one snapped, launching Larry into the skies above Los Angeles. Instead of leveling off at about 30 feet as he'd planned, Larry rose to 16,000 feet, and at that height, Larry couldn't risk shooting any of the balloons. So, he stayed up there drifting cold and frightened for more than 14 hours when he found himself in the primary flight approach corridor for LAX.

Legend has it that a Pan Am pilot was the first to spot Larry and quickly radioed the tower, telling them that he'd just passed a guy in a lawn chair with a gun. This sounds more like Oklahoma than California, but okay. The Federal Aviation Administration was not amused. Larry started shooting out the balloons to start his descent but accidentally dropped the gun. After drifting for a couple of hours, he eventually landed in a Long Beach neighborhood entangled in some power lines. Larry survived without any serious injuries.¹ Now that is an ascension story!

¹ <https://pastordawn.com/2020/05/20/the-ascension-never-actually-happened-ascension-is-always-happening-8/#more-12881>, accessed 4/26/24.

As I mentioned, the story of the ascension in the Bible appears in Acts and only in one of the gospels, encompassing the last 9 verses of Luke. Both were written by the same unnamed, unknown author. Luke, chapter 24, begins with the disciples discovering the empty tomb. Later that day, Jesus appeared to two of the disciples as they walked along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They didn't recognize him until he sat at the table with them and broke the bread. That Emmaus story is one of my favorites. It is the story that reminds us that any time we gather with other people around a table to eat, the love Jesus came to reveal is there, too. Later, as the two disciples were telling the others about their encounter with Jesus on the road and at the table, our text picks up. Again, he ate with them, this time fish, and spoke to them about his purpose, at least according to the author of Luke. He blessed them and ascended to heaven.

Let's start by wondering, since the author of Luke is not writing about an event that actually happened, why did he choose to end the first part of his story this way? Why did he have Jesus float away into the sky? There were other choices. What would have been wrong with ending the Gospel with the Emmaus story? It's a good story! We will find part of the answer to our "why" by learning a little bit of history. After the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, a comet appeared in the sky. Julius Caesar's nephew and adopted child, Octavian, who would later become Augustus Caesar, used this story to claim that the comet was Julius ascending to the gods and becoming a god himself.

Augustus later used this story to bolster his claim to the throne as emperor. He minted a coin with his portrait engraved on one side and an image of the comet with eight rays beaming from it on the other side, reading "Divine Julius" in Latin. Most of his coins were inscribed with "Son of God" in Latin. The deification of his adopted father made him the Son of God and a god himself. As the "emperor-god" of the Roman Empire, he was also called Savior of the world, Redeemer, and Lord. Legend has it that Augustus also ascended to the gods after his death.

Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus and began his public life during the reign of Tiberius. When Jesus' followers called him the Son of God, it was a deliberate act of treason against Caesar, who had been using the title before Jesus was born. To declare Jesus the Son of God was to declare that Caesar was not.² This story of Jesus ascending to heaven was written decades after Jesus' death. At that point, everyone who knew Jesus was likely dead. It was written as not only a slap in the face to the Romans, who were still oppressing the Jewish people but also a way of encouraging Jesus' followers, who had waited for almost a whole generation for Jesus, whom they believed to be the Jewish long-awaited Messiah, to come back and take over as their king. I imagine that far out from his death, they were second-guessing what they believed. If the emperors of Rome were gods and Jesus was God, then they had a

² <https://enfleshed.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/May292.pdf>, accessed 4/23/24.

fighting chance. It's all about hierarchy. Why? Because it is all they knew, and honestly, it is all we know.

This is why we insist that the divine must be somewhere up there or out there, far away from us. It is all hierarchy. Christianity originated in the Greek culture, which is why Platonic dualism influenced the early Christian view of humanity and divinity. We see that dualism when we consider some of the horrible things Christians have done in the name of Christianity. There has been so much violence that stems from the faulty belief that some people have a connection to God and others don't. It has fueled the conquest and oppression of all kinds of people. In so many ways, Christianity has taught us that God is always just out of our reach. We've been taught that our sin separates us from God. We've been told that if we don't believe the right things, we will be *eternally* separated from God. We talk about a place far away where God resides and where, if we don't mess it up, we will go when we die. The separation of God from humanity may have been a comfort to the early followers of Jesus, but I don't think it's helpful for us. It is not helpful to understand God as distant, as a heavenly CEO, waiting to smite us or any of the other scary images that have been offered. But again, hierarchy is all we know.

A quote written by post-colonial theologian Mayra Rivera inspired me to consider a healthier interpretation of this week's text. The quote is printed in your bulletin: "God is over all—as one who envelopes the immense organism of which we are all part, a divine envelope through which God and creation touch each other." The story of the ascension forces us to think about what we mean when we talk about heaven. What if God isn't into our systems of hierarchy?

What if we substituted the word love for God in Rivera's quote, "Love is all over---as one who envelopes the immense organism of which we are all part, a sacred envelope through which love and creation touch each other." What if heaven is a place or a time in which we feel completely loved? What if the kin-dom of heaven really is here? And what if the love we have inside ourselves is the part of us that was "made in the image of God?" If that were true, God wouldn't just be one of us; God would be all of us.

Maybe that is what the author of Luke imagined as he wrote the story of Jesus' ascension.

Maybe the blessing here at the end of the Gospel of Luke is meant to be Jesus' way of passing on the love he came to reveal. I believe that the first followers of Jesus experienced God's love through Jesus in ways that perhaps we can't completely understand. I also believe that after his death, those same followers continued to experience his presence through their love for each other and through familiar activities, like when they ate together. I can't think of anyone who has ever worked hard to bring about compassion, justice, and peace who didn't want other people to carry on their work after their death. Love is the blessing he gave the disciples, and they, in turn, carried on his work by sharing that same kind of love with other people. That's what Christianity is at its best, after all. It's people loving other people, not to

get to some far-off distant heaven, but to envelope people in love right here, to create heaven on Earth.

And the whole ascending to heaven thing? I understand why the author wrote that. I mean...he wanted the early followers of Jesus to hang on to the hope that there was power available to them that would save them from the oppression they still faced. To do that, Jesus had to be at least as strong and mighty as the deified Roman emperors. That aside, wouldn't it have been a cooler story if Jesus had blessed the disciples and then kind of vaporized into confetti? Or, better yet, glitter? Glitter hangs around forever...they would have had a visible reminder of the love Jesus left with them every single day. They would have had a visible reminder of their purpose.

We left Larry Watkins tangled in some power lines following his grand adventure of ascension. Once he was safely on the ground, he was asked why he did all of that. His response was, "Well, you can't just sit there." With or without the glitter, each one of us was created to reflect the love Jesus revealed through his life. We can't just sit there. We have to show the world that God is among us. God is all of us, dear ones. Amen.