
Ascension: Keep looking up!
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
May 16, 2021
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 24:44-53

What do you think of the reading from our gospel today? That was Luke's version of the story of the ascension of Jesus. According to tradition, the ascension was last Thursday. So today is “Ascension Sunday”. But what do you think? I think the story provides a window into our own faith. But first, a bit of history.

[image: ascension]

Jesus said that he had to go to heaven in order to send a comforter - the holy spirit - down to dwell with all people. So according to the story, there were 9 days when Jesus was not present on earth - and neither was the spirit. This created a tradition in the early church known as “novena”, from the Latin “novem”, meaning nine. Novena was the name given to a nine day period during which prayers and other petitions were made. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the word novena also refers to the prayers themselves.

There are no references to any periods of 9 in the Old Testament. The period of 9 seems to have been created specifically for the period from the ascension to pentecost. Mind you, ancient Romans utilized periods of 9 days for many reasons. For example, “The author Livy recorded how nine days of prayers were celebrated at Mount Alban to avert some evil or wrath of the gods as predicted by the soothsayers.”¹ Perhaps the early church adopted the 9 day period from these Roman practices.

[image: st Jude]

But however the tradition started, the Roman Catholic church has made good use of the period of 9. Starting in the Middle Ages, novenas of prayers were offered before Christmas to remind us of the 9 months Jesus spent in Mary’s womb. And there are many different novenas, so they have been used for many different purposes. The use of novenas declined somewhat after Vatican II. Perhaps because some of the applications of novenas were basically superstitious. To quote Father William Saunders, “In every parish

¹ <http://catholicstraightanswers.com/what-is-a-novena/>

I have been assigned, I have found copies of a St. Jude novena which basically states that if a person goes to Church for nine days and leaves a copy of the novena to St. Jude, then the prayer will be granted. Sort of like a spiritual chain letter. This is dispensing machine Catholicism. Just as a person puts the coin in the vending machine and presses the button to get the desired soda. Here a person says the prayers, goes to church, and is supposedly guaranteed that the request will be granted. So much for God's will. What is really sad these days is that the person simply Xeroxes the letter. One would think they could at least hand-write it. Worse yet, I usually have to pick up these letters which are left all over the Church."²

[centre]

Novenas still serve a legitimate purpose of course. Because any 9 day period can be used for spiritual exercise and an opportunity to spend intentional time with God. And we ourselves should not be too quick to dismiss spending this period of time - between the ascension and pentecost - in some reflective activities. But get busy because you only have 7 days left now!

Alternatively, you could think really hard about the meaning of the ascension, and of pentecost. You could instead come up with lots of questions about these stories.

Here's a short list of questions that might occur to you.

[image: Jesus in space]

Let's start simple - what does it mean to say that Jesus ascended? Does that mean Jesus's body? Or his spirit? And if it was Jesus's body, where is that body now? Is Jesus still using it? Most people today do not think of heaven as a specific place - "up there" - so where did Jesus go? And if Jesus's body is "in space", how does it breathe? If it doesn't need to breathe, is it really a human body? If what ascended was Jesus's spirit, then what does that mean? Isn't the spirit of Jesus everywhere, including the heavens and the earth? If the spirit of Jesus is everywhere then what does it mean to say the Jesus's spirit ascended?

Or try this: Jesus said he had to ascend to heaven in order for the comforter - the holy spirit - to come down. But if the spirit couldn't hear Jesus on earth, how can the

² Ibid.

spirit hear us when we reach out? Can't Jesus and the spirit co-exist anyway?

[image: you will be with me]

Or, on a more mundane level, when exactly did Jesus head to the heavens? In Luke 23, while Jesus is hanging on the cross dying, Jesus tells the criminal hanging beside him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." So in Luke 23, Jesus is in heaven sometime on Good Friday. But in the ascension story, it is 40 days after Easter - ascension day - that Jesus heads to the heavens.

It's almost as if the details of the ascension were not that important to the early church, because they didn't ask questions like these. Perhaps that's why the description in the Bible (at least in Luke) is so short, "While Jesus was blessing his companions, Jesus withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven". No real action. No real drama. No real details. Perhaps the fact of the ascension mattered to the early church, but the process of the ascension did not.

[image: spirit]

Another interesting take on the story is this. If pentecost was the day that the holy spirit descended on all people, how is it that we have stories from the Old Testament, and from other religions too, that describe the spirit interacting with people long before the time of Jesus. If you ever feel compelled to explore a very deep theological rabbit hole, this just might be the topic for you. Some people argue that at pentecost, the spirit was permanently available to all people, while earlier experiences of the spirit were temporary. But when we read stories - like God calling Samuel - we usually imagine that Samuel experienced the presence of God more or less the way that you and I do today. If Samuel's experience of God was very different than our own, then I am not even sure what the story means to us.

[image: god is not christian]

This question is perhaps more urgent than we realize. How do we understand spirit when we hear descriptions of the spirit from people of different religious traditions? When Jewish people speak about the spirit, we probably imagine they think similarly to us because of our shared narrative in what we call the Old Testament. But what about when Muslims speak of the spirit? What about when Indigenous Canadian's speak of

their experiences of spirit. Or Hindus, or Buddhists? Or even people of no faith who speak of their connections with the divine using entirely different words? The spirit is not Christian, you know. The spirit of God is what connects all people. As Desmond Tutu said,

[image: without us]

“Without us, God has no eyes; without us, God has no ears; without us, God has no arms or hands. God relies on us. Won’t you join other people of faith in becoming God’s partners in the world?”.

After Easter, Jesus kept appearing to people and then disappearing. How was today’s story any different than other stories? Stories where the resurrected Jesus came into a locked room, ate some fish, said, “Don’t be afraid”, and then disappeared? Perhaps there is no difference. Here’s my take on this. I believe that the story of Jesus’s ascension was never intended to describe a historical one-time event. But rather a repetition of what was already well known. Because the deeper meaning behind all of this is that we are not alone - that God is with us. Thanks be to God.

Think about it. I assume that many of us here grew up in some sort of family. And part of being a family - whether you relate to this as a parent or as a child or as both - is when a parent tells a child that they love them. But when a parent says to a child, “I love you” it is not a declaration of something new. It is a re-statement of something that is already well-known. So why do we say “I love you” over and over? Well, because it is comforting. Because it is important. Because it is true. And those are good enough reasons to keep restating the obvious. And in the Bible, Jesus keeps telling people over and over “Do not be afraid” and then he heads to the heavens. Why do we hear the same story over and over when the chronology doesn’t really work? Because it is comforting. Because it is important. Because it is true. And those are good enough reasons to keep restating the obvious. That we are not alone.

[Paul 1: left side]

Which is why I’ve titled this reflection, “Ascension: Keep looking up”. By which

I mean, take full advantage of these nine days, this novena, and create your own space for intentional spiritual nurture. Make time for yourself and for God, because you are worth it. Take time to reflect on your life, reflect on your faith, reflect on your relationships. Open yourself to the reality of God's peace in your life. Open yourself to the possibilities of forgiveness, healing and wholeness in your life. Open yourself to embracing the new life that is already in your midst. Make the time. Take the time. You are worth it. I mean, who could disagree with that?

[Paul 2: right side]

Well, I disagree with that.

[Paul 1]

Sigh ... not this idiot!

[Paul 2]

I mean sure, looking up for spiritual nurture is fine for a while, but I would also encourage us to stop looking up. By which I mean look around. Look with new eyes at the person sitting beside you right now. Look with fresh eyes at the community in which you live. The point of the ascension is that Jesus is not here anymore, so we ourselves are the hands and feet of Jesus. You will meet someone today for whom you are the only "Jesus" they will meet. We are the hands and feet of Jesus today. We are also the eyes, the ears, and the heart of Jesus. As Desmond Tutu said, "Without us, God has no eyes; without us, God has no ears; without us, God has no arms or hands. God relies on us. Won't you join other people of faith in becoming God's partners in the world?". Stop looking up and start looking around. Who could disagree with that?

[Paul 3: coming up from bottom - go to left]

OK - we've heard enough from you two. Just leave. I apologize for my colleagues. I mean sure, it's important to look up. And it's important to look around. But you are bright people and I'm sure you've heard those messages before in countless sermons. And yes, they are both good ideas. But I want to propose we also look in a third direction.

[image: international day]

Tomorrow - May 17 - is the "International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia". So this is our annual reminder that we need to name, expose, and confront people when we witness hatred or hostility against people with non-traditional sexualities and genders. Before I agreed to come to Sydenham-Heritage United Church I was assured that this congregation welcomes everyone, including people with non-traditional genders and sexualities. So I'm going to assume that I don't need to preach the idea to you. And please let me know if I'm wrong.

Because instead, I want to propose a third direction we should look. Yes, we should look up. And yes, we should look out. But I invite us to also look back at ourselves - as a congregation - from outside. What does Sydenham-Heritage United Church look like from the outside? And in particular, what do we look like to people who do not know us? This exercise is sort of an extension to the questionnaire you received this week from our profile committee.

[image: centre]

And in honour of the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia, I want to ask you how would a Brantford resident know that we are open and welcoming to all people? Can they tell when they look at our building? Can they tell when they look at our church signage? Can they tell when they look at our web site? Can they tell when they see our YouTube channel, our FaceBook page, or our Instagram feed? I'm not going to answer that question for you right now. Instead, I invite each of us to drive or walk past the church building this week and take a good look at it. And to really look at our web site and our social media offerings. And decide for yourself whether or not we present ourselves to strangers as open and welcoming. Or whether our openness is

actually a well-guarded secret.

Look up. Look around. Look back at ourselves. And share with each other what we see. Who are we? And who do we want to be? Who does Brantford need us to be?

We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

Amen.