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## Sermon for Ascension Day 2021

What is the appropriate response to hearing that story from Acts of Jesus' leaving his disciples by ascending into the heavens? If we try to understand it within naturalistic or historical categories alone, we shall be baffled and possibly embarrassed. Certainly many clergy dread being put down to preach on this subject! A different response is to recognise that, if this is about God's actions in the drama of salvation, then our picture of God is too small. Indeed, I would say that the emphasis on these naturalistic ways of understanding the Gospels has shrunk our picture of God. As this story suggests, God bursts out of the constrictions of our naturalistic frameworks.

To appreciate what these stories are showing us, we need a prayerful, symbolic approach that opens up the deep meaning within these evocative images. Jesus ascends - he rises in order to raise us into heaven and to join us to God's own self and with also with others.

This death-defying power of God is very different from the powers of this world because God proceeds not by force or violence but with love God draws us on, and that is also how God comes towards us, as gift, most dramatically in the story all this is leading up to, that is the story of Pentecost. That was an occasion of maximum inclusion - where all heard the apostles in their own language.

God's rule is manifested by this strange combination of presence in absence. He ascends and leaves them only for them to be asked, challenged really, "Why are you looking up to heaven?" Just as the women at the tomb were also told not to linger looking there but to go and tell the disciples what they had seen. This challenge is one we too need to hear. We too tend to stay looking back at

when or where we last encountered the mystery of God. A certain grateful remembering is appropriate but often we are stuck with that last significant memory, and nostalgically we often focus on the externals that were around then. These particular details are suffused with the grace of the occasion but they are not the real deal. In the words of the angels, "He is not here."

This is all part of God's mysterious presence in absence which disappoints us—more even, it discombobulates us. Things are not as we thought they were, or rather, God is not what or who we thought . . . this is just the tearing of the veil that we need if we are to see God as God draws closer to us and if we are to receive God's own self.

Just as they were to encounter God again in Jerusalem so too the Lord will meet us again in this sacrament of the Eucharist. And familiar though the words may be, it is always, as the hymn sings, "New every morning." If new, then not already familiar, or known. What becomes familiar is this process of being discombobulated when our expectations are not met. Meeting our Lord seems to require this. It seems that we experience his going, his absence first, our expectations being turned upside down. But that isn't the end. The story for those first disciples, and also for us, continues. In prayer and worship, in Christ we ascend with hearts and minds to dwell with him in foretaste of sharing everlastingly in the heavenly banquet.

Meanwhile, the apostles are told to return to Jerusalem where, we with hindsight know, that the Lord will meet them again. We too are called, invited but not ordered, invited to come to the feast of the Lamb, to join with all others who also have heard the glorious good news that Christ is risen and with them to be witnesses to this.

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