



Ascension Day (C)

Love Ascending

[RCL] Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 or Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

When the God of heaven chose also to dwell on earth, the Word became flesh. From there the Word went around preaching and teaching. It was baptized, crucified, and buried. It rose again, walked to Emmaus, appeared to the disciples, and even ate a piece of fish. Finally, the scriptures tell us, the Word was carried up to heaven.

If you're listening to this sermon, you probably know at least a little something about the life of Jesus. But it would seem that many Christians are less than impressed by even the most extraordinary stories of our faith. We tend to take them for granted. Maybe that's because our culture has been overexposed to them. (Think nativity scenes in department stores or crepe-paper Easter decorations of Jesus popping out of an egg.)

Regardless of the reason, it hasn't even taken 2,000 years for accounts of our back-from-the-dead-miracle-working rabbi to become commonplace. The result is that narratives that should captivate and enthrall instead go in one ear and out the other, bypassing the imagination altogether.

The Ascension is no exception. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that we faithful church-going folks have heard it all our lives. Or perhaps we are simply reluctant to sit with such stories and all that they entail because we're afraid to question them. Do we really believe God was born of a woman—of a *virgin* no less—only to fly back up to heaven a few decades later? Put like that, it does sound pretty preposterous. But some of us may be afraid even to think such things, lest our questions turn to doubts, our doubts to fears, and our fears to an abandonment of our faith altogether.

Thank God for days like today. Feasts like the Ascension remind us that it's okay—and not just okay but necessary, holy even—to spend time contemplating the more miraculous aspects of our faith, even if we can't explain them.

The fact of the matter is, explaining them isn't the point. Even if we made it our mission to prove just how a person could be bodily assumed into heaven, we would probably end up sorely disappointed that we could not answer it once and for all. Lucky for us, the point of our faith is not to prove that its tenets—things like the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension—are true. The point is to *live* like they are true.

Today we celebrate that the same flesh that Jesus puts on at Christmas he takes with him at the Ascension. The fundamental and remarkable truth of that matter is this: Jesus came from the heart of God to put on a flesh like ours so that he might take the heart of our humanity back to God. The essence of God is joined with the essence of humanity. We may never have final proof of exactly how that works, but one thing is certain: we are called to embrace the new life made possible if only we live like it's true.

Today's feast is but one more invitation extended to us during the Church's year of grace to imagine in our hearts something we cannot fully comprehend in our minds so that we might continually be drawn nearer to a love we cannot fathom, a love that shares our flesh.

By becoming clothed in human likeness, God has shown us in the person of Jesus that he is in solidarity with us *forever*. God does not treat the frail flesh of our humanity like a trendy seasonal ensemble, casting it aside as soon as the weather changes. Nor does God liken it to a designer gown, perfectly fitted and worn only on special occasions. And it is certainly much more than a cheap t-shirt bought to remember an earthly vacation.

God's coming in the flesh is yet another sign of God's everlasting covenant with us. God's promise to us at the Ascension is the same promise that God has kept since creation began—I will be with you always. *Always*. Not only in moments of joy, pride, or great clarity, but also in the darkest days of suffering, fear, and confusion.

The fact that God became like us does not make us equal to God. Nor does it mean that God is bound by our mortality—God is still God, and we still are not—but it does mean that God is close by. Even after sharing in a life like ours, and even after suffering a death like ours, God would not let us go.

Can you imagine a love like that?

It is a love that cares so deeply for us that it will never, ever be done with us. It is a love far, far beyond us, but that commits never to be apart from us. It is a love that, as our collect puts it, “ascended far above all heavens that [it] might fill all things.” It is a love that says, “Wherever I am, wherever I go, however I get there, you will always be a part of me.”

And, lest we forget, it is a love that asks us to be its witnesses to the ends of the earth. That's a tall order to be sure. We won't always do it perfectly, but we are called to do it nonetheless, and whenever we succeed, to give credit where credit is due: to the grace of a God whose love unites heaven to earth and earth to heaven, and to the Word that makes it possible for us to live like it's true.

***The Rev. Warren Thomas Swenson** is a priest of the Diocese of West Missouri, currently serving as associate priest of Southeast Tennessee Episcopal Ministry (STEM), a system of five yoked congregations in the Diocese of Tennessee. Warren is a candidate for the Master of Sacred Theology degree at the School of Theology at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn., where he also serves as Visiting Instructor of Rhetoric in the College of Arts and Sciences. His research interests include queer theology, homiletics, and American presidential rhetoric. Warren received his Master of Divinity degree from Sewanee in 2018 and still resides there with his husband, Walker. Together they enjoy lingering back-porch conversations, racking up frequent flyer miles, and doting on their niece and nephews from afar.*