

## The Ascension

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Reverend Rebecca Newland

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*Acts 1.1-11, Psalm 47, Ephesians 1.15-23, Matt 28.16-20*

Have you ever seen a movie where you are thoroughly enjoying yourself, it is wonderfully done and you are absolutely enthralled and then the screenwriters do something that makes it all seem absurd and unreal?? Some of the James Bond movies do that all the time. You know when 007 ski jumps out of an aeroplane into a helicopter, crash lands in Nepal, sends the baddie into space on his own nuclear weapon and gets the girl. Actually I've never seen that in a James Bond movie but I probably will.

Well, for me the Ascension always feels like part of a script that has gone wrong. At the beginning of the Jesus story I am hooked—baby born in a stable, angels on high, murderous Herod, runaway family. No problem with any of that. Wonderful teaching by a wise and loving man, miraculous healings, confrontation with the corrupt and powerful, standing up for the poor and outcast—absolutely no problem with that. Bloody and painful end, crucifixion by the mob, and abandonment by all—that certainly seems real. I don't even have any problem with the resurrection. God raises a man from the dead after being in the grave three days and I shout for joy. But when I come to the ascension I go—OK that's it. You have lost me.

In my mind's eye I see Jesus floating up above, his feet disappearing into a cloud and then the cloud drifting away. It is faintly comical. It doesn't help that we have all those medieval and renaissance painting of Jesus among the clouds with arms spread out in blessing. But it is there in the story along with all the things I do not have trouble with. It's there not once but at least four times plus references in the epistles. Luke has it twice—at the end of his Gospel and then at the beginning of Acts. It is also in the creed in that line that goes, "he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father". So what do we do with this part of the good news? What do we do with that part in the creed? Do we just brush it away and ignore it, relegating it to the too hard basket? Do we just put it down to a literary device that conveniently solves the problem of what you do with Jesus once he's been resurrected? I mean you can't have him die again. You can't have him wander off to India and abandon the disciples. What do you do with a man you simply can't hold down?

And that is the point I think. The Ascension is actually more than just a way to get a character out of the way so you can continue the rest of the story. What the ascension is about is a man you can't hold down. Just think about it. Everything had been thrown against Jesus. Everything had worked to silence him. Indeed they held him down. They nailed him down. They murdered him. But...they could not, they could not keep him down. Jesus rose from that grave and brought life to the very place where there had been death and only death before.

The Ascension story we heard today is the final post—resurrection appearance of the man whom they simply couldn't keep down. It is the glorious witness to life and love overcoming violence and death. It is the final appearance and the point of departure for the risen Christ to the unending and eternal glory of his resurrection. It is the narrative of Christ's ascension into the heaven. By going before us he in fact opens up heaven for all of creation. And, as such, it is the story of the in—your—face, wild and wonderful, cosmic and glorious event, the icing on the cake, if you will, of the resurrection life and power of Jesus of Nazareth. The resurrection and the ascension are a seamless event.

To grasp the continuity of this amazing story we must not get stuck on the literal facts. I know and you know that we live in a modern, scientific world where we understand that God is not sitting on the clouds above. We don't have the same view of the cosmos that ancient people did, but that is not the point here. The story of Christ's ascension is not a page from an astronomy textbook. Rather, it is a word, the song and description of a resurrection event and of the meaning of the resurrection itself...that you can't keep a good man down, and that we belong in the heart of God.

In reading or hearing the story of Christ's Ascension you will notice that the disciples are a bit nonplussed by it all. They stand there gazing up with mouths wide open in amazement and awe. But the angels who are on the scene bring God's message to them, and it is this, "Get on with it!" They are not to be stuck in the mystery of the event. Rather they are to live it. They are to discover the gift of new life, new hope, and new beginnings in themselves.

The truth is that there is a lot that does try to hold us down in our lives, in the church, and in the world. The story in the news this week that has me absolutely perplexed is the one about the German father that imprisoned his own daughter... At the international level we have food crisis where we are confronted not only with the impact of climate change on growing cycles but the obscenity of people growing crops for ethanol production so that the richest can continue with high levels of oil consumption whilst the poorest have no food to eat. There is violence and war in this world, in our own cities, and in the human heart. There are oppressive systems that keep people tied down in grinding poverty and hopelessness. There is sickness, sin, and sadness in our own experience and lives. There is dissension and dissonance even in the Church of God. And these things connive and plot to keep us down, just as they tried to keep Jesus down.

But the message of the resurrection and the ascension is you can't, you can't keep a good man down. God will not be held down, kept down, tied down by any of these realities. God's life and love are so much stronger. Through the resurrection we are not tied down any more, but that has a consequence for us. God has given us life, hope, and love and that is our mission and God wants us to get on with it. Our Gospel reading has what is called the great commission where Jesus tells the disciples, "Go and make disciples of all nations". In the Acts reading Jesus tells them that they will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. God has made us partners in the mission and victory of life itself, the victory of love over hatred and violence.

When we get into that mission partnership with God amazing things can happen. Local church communities can suddenly find new meaning and purpose. In individuals change radical change can happen when they discovered that they didn't have to be held down in their own life, even though the challenges they faced were real. Instead they allowed themselves to be released for something new, something higher, something that drew them out of themselves into the life and power of God. I have seen this in my own life and the life of others.

Walter Brueggemann, a very famous Old Testament scholar wrote that despair is the prevailing mood of humankind. We have so much to be despairing about. Despair as you know is the negation of hope. Brueggemann goes on to say that the primary Christian virtue needed is hope, but it must be hope in action, grasped by a community that can imagine what can be new. The challenge of the resurrection and the ascension is that are tests of the imagination...Imagining and then knowing that the love of God is the most powerful force in the universe and that that love working in and through us can overcome all despair; imagining and then knowing that Jesus is with us as we take that message to others. God did a grand and powerful new thing in the resurrection of Jesus, and God sealed it in the ascent of Jesus to

God's own centre and heart. It is the purpose, work and mission of God that continues in us today.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, keep us from getting bogged down, held down, kept down. As you have risen and ascended, so may we. As you have overcome death and the grave, so may we. As you have gone home to God, so may we. Lift us, we pray, to your love and your glory that we may be with you forever and ever. Amen.