

Ascension of the Lord

May 24, 2020

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Ascension of the risen Jesus into ‘Heaven.’ The risen Jesus, after a series of appearances to his disciples and after having commissioned them for a worldwide mission (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:47; John 20:21), “was carried up into heaven” (Luke 24: 51) and “sat down at the right hand of God” (Mark 16: 19). And the Scripture tells us that He “will come in the same way as you saw him going to heaven” (Acts 1: 11).

However, as we rummage through the four Gospel accounts on the event of the ascension, we find striking differences in the reports presented by the four evangelists. It is only Luke who has offered us a report proper on Jesus’ ascension into heaven in his two volumes (Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:6-11). Matthew’s Gospel is surprisingly silent on the ascension of Jesus. The Matthean Jesus does not ascend into heaven; instead, He assures the disciples that “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). So, there is no ascension in Matthew’s Gospel, and the risen Jesus is always present with his disciples here on earth, as they go to all nations – “making disciples, baptizing and teaching” (verses 19-20).

Coming to the Gospel of Mark, yes, there is a mention of the event of the ascension in this Gospel too (Mark 16: 19). However, we should keep in mind that the account of the ascension in this Gospel is part of the “Longer Ending” of Mark’s Gospel (16: 9-20), which was originally not part of Mark’s Gospel. Actually, the original Gospel of Mark ended at verse 8 on a note of fear and silence by the women. They did not communicate with anyone the good news of the resurrection of Jesus on account of their fear of the enemies. Finding this fear and silence of the women in verse 8 as a very inappropriate conclusion to the Gospel, a later redactor (editor) added verses 9-20, thus giving a very glorious and happy ending to the Gospel of Mark. Thus, verses 9 -20, which contain the account of the ascension, is a later addition to the Gospel of Mark by a scribe.

Now we come to the Gospel of John. John’s Gospel does not give a clear description of the ascension proper as found in Luke; instead, John merely records Jesus’ statement to Mary Magdalene that “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and to your God” (20: 17). Nevertheless, this statement of the risen Jesus clearly points to his eventual ascension. The upshot of this brief survey is that while Luke and John speak about the ascension proper, Matthew and the **original** Gospel of Mark are silent on the event of the ascension.

Besides serving an academic purpose, this brief survey into the few occurrences of the account of Jesus’ ascension should help us open our minds to the principal message, which the Gospel writers are trying to communicate to us. The primary purpose of the Gospels is to give us a theology and spirituality, which would inspire us to live our Christian life as God wants us to live. The silence by Matthew and by the **original** Gospel of Mark (which ended at 16:8)

regarding Jesus' ascension probably points to the fact that the event of the ascension was not a major topic of concern in the Matthean and Marcan communities. Even for Luke and John, who speak about the ascension in their writings, their primary intention was not so much to give us a **factual report** of what actually took place, but to make a theological statement for our spirituality. It is to that message we shall now turn our attention.

First of all, why do the New Testament writers say that Jesus ascended into "Heaven?" To begin with, the use of the term "heaven" instead of "God" reflects the pious reticence of the Jewish people to refer to God directly. The word "heaven" is a circumlocution or a periphrasis for "God." That is, the Jewish Christians would not use the word 'God' out of respect for God, so 'heaven' was an indirect way of speaking about God. So, for the Jews and for the Jewish Christians, 'Heaven' meant 'God.' Therefore, the ascension of Jesus into heaven would mean that Jesus entered into God's presence, the presence of his Father.

Secondly, by stating that Jesus ascended into heaven/God, the NT writers were addressing yet another controversy that was prevalent among the Jews, the Samaritans, and the Jewish Christians of the first century. Each of these groups had confined God to a particular place or location. For the Jewish people, God first appeared to Moses on Mount **Sinai** (Exodus 24:16) and, later, God dwelt on Mount **Sion**, more precisely, in the Temple of Jerusalem which was on Mount **Sion** (Psalm 122:1-2). Again, Prophet Elijah travels to Mount **Horeb** to hear God's voice (1 Kings 19:8-10). But, the Samaritans (the pagan Jews) believed that God dwelt on Mount **Gerizim** as instructed by Moses (Deuteronomy 11:29).

Coming to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples on a mountain in **Galilee** (Matthew 5:1) and, after his resurrection, appears to his disciples on a mountain, again in **Galilee** (Mt 28:16). This controversy regarding the dwelling place of God was very much alive also in Johannine community (John 4: 20). Now, by stating that Jesus ascended into "Heaven," the Gospel writers are also putting an end to this controversy regarding God's dwelling place. They are telling us that God's presence can no longer be confined or limited to any particular place, and no particular group of people can now manipulate or control God's presence. His presence is universal; He is omnipresent. The boundaries, to which God was confined, are now broken open, and replaced by the immensity of heaven.

So, God is everywhere. His presence is universal. Therefore, Mark would say that the Kingdom of God is **near** (Mark 1:14). Matthew says "**where two or three are gathered** in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20). Luke says that the Kingdom of God is **among you** (Luke 17:21). And, John says that God is Spirit and is always found wherever people worship Him in **spirit and truth** (Jn 4:24). Again, in John's Gospel, God's presence can never securely be anchored in any particular location, because the wind (=Spirit) blows where it chooses (John 3:8).

The ascension of Jesus into **heaven** is a theologically rich, doctrinally correct, and spiritually uplifting apostolic pronouncement by the early Christian Church that, with the ascension, God is present to everyone irrespective of religion, caste, class, color, gender, race, or national boundaries. Everyone, pure or impure, saint or sinner, good or bad, male/female or trans-gender, has equal and easy access to God, which had already been prophetically announced by the symbolic tearing of the curtain in the Jerusalem Temple into two pieces at the death of Jesus (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). The tearing of the temple curtain into two pieces was already a very bold statement by the authors of all three Synoptic Gospels that the distance and separation created between God and his people had finally been eliminated.

So, the ascension of Jesus would mean that, from now on, God's presence can no longer be limited to any particular nation, location, or people. Since the whole earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24: 1), wherever we live, we can experience God provided we abide in Him (John 15:4). Moreover, the ground on which we stand is already a holy place (Exodus 3: 5), and so the whole universe is holy. If so, God is present everywhere. And, if God is present everywhere, S/He is also freely available to everyone, provided they worship in spirit and truth (John 4: 23-24). Amen.

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