

The Ascension is more than a footnote

by Bishop Kenneth Untener

Seventy-three years ago Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic by plane. A short while later he returned and was given a hero's welcome, making appearances all over the country. Eventually there came a time when he stopped doing this and retired to his own quiet life.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, Jesus crossed through death to the other side. He returned and made appearances in Jerusalem and in Galilee. Eventually there came a time when he stopped doing this and retired to a quiet life in heaven.

As tempting as it might be to draw such parallel, it won't work * not even close. When we examine the reasons why, we'll learn something about the Ascension.

One Single Event

In the creed we say, "I believe in Jesus Christ . . . he died, and was buried . . . rose again, ascended into heaven . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit." These elements all make up one single event, and each is essential to what Jesus accomplished through the cross.

Jesus died a full, complete, and total human death.

He was beyond resuscitation. The this-side-of-death stage of his human existence terminated, forever (just as, when he grew up, his boyhood stage permanently ended).

Jesus was buried.

Jesus was placed in an identifiable tomb (not a common grave), and placed there by an identifiable person (Joseph of Arimathea). Three of the four Gospels note that this was witnessed by Mary Magdalene and at least one other woman disciple.

Jesus went through death and rose again to a new and different kind of human life.

This is where the analogy with Charles Lindbergh begins to break down.

** Jesus did not simply survive the crossing over to life on the other side, and then return to assure us that he was successful. He was raised to a different, higher form of human existence.

** The transformed Jesus was the Jesus who was born of Mary. Part of the significance of the empty tomb is that his new risen humanity incorporates all that he was. He is no longer a child, no longer a youth, no longer a carpenter . . .but he is the man who was a child, was a youth, was a carpenter, and all this remains part of the who he is. It is like the acorn become the oak.

Jesus ascended into heaven.

The rising of Jesus meant "going somewhere," not temporarily, but permanently. The rising of Jesus was not simply a matter of coming out of the tomb and walking around in familiar places as a hero who made a

crossing no one else had accomplished, making appearances here and there --like Lindbergh coming back to the U.S. after his flight and getting off the boat in New York and walking around with his old friends.

If we just had a "resurrection" without an "ascension" we would miss the fact that Jesus' rising involved "going somewhere,"and that "somewhere" was the place of his destiny (and now our destiny too).

Jesus went to "the right hand of the Father." Imagine. A human being, one of us, is now at the center of the Trinity. The ascension is the other half of the resurrection.

Jesus has brought "flesh" into the realm where we thought only spirits, angels could dwell -- into the realm where God lives. From now on, we all "belong there."

Jesus sent his Spirit upon us.

After his death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus was able to be with us in a new way, by sending his Spirit upon us. We need to look more closely at the "sending of the Spirit" by Jesus. It is critical to our understanding of the Ascension.

At the last supper table in John's Gospel, Jesus talks about "going away" and the disciples are understandably upset. Jesus says, "But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go."

Really? How is it better for us that he is gone? Wouldn't we rather have him with us . . . as he was with Martha, Mary and Lazarus in their home, or with the disciples in the boat, or right there at the last supper table?

Jesus answers that question.

Immediately after saying it is better for them that he goes, his next words are: "For if I do not go the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." He had said that he would not leave them orphans, and he is true to his promise.

In John's Gospel, when Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room on Easter Sunday night, the first thing he did was breathe on them and say, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is John's description of "Pentecost."

By dying, rising, and ascending into a transformed human existence, Jesus can send his Spirit upon us and be with us in a new and better way. This is what so often is overlooked. Jesus died, rose and ascended so that he could be closer to us. And he is closer to us than ever before.

Prior to his death/resurrection/ascension, Jesus was limited by time and space. If he was in Capernaum, that's where he was, not in Nazareth. If he was in Bethsaida, that's where he was, not Cana. For example, when he sent out his 72 disciples on mission two by two, he was unable to go with them, because he couldn't be in all those places at the same time.

Let's say, for example, that instead of passing through death to the other side and to a new and different kind of life . . . let's say that instead Jesus died and then miraculously came back to life on this side of death, and miraculously continued to live without aging until the end of time. Wonderful. He would be present in his earthly form for every generation. In this modern age he could travel around the world by jet, be on television, even the internet.

But that presence -- sporadic visits to different areas of the globe, appearances "from a distance" on TV -- couldn't compare to his intimate and constant presence with each of us through his Spirit. In his Spirit Jesus is able to be with us in a fuller, closer presence than that before his death. The Ascension is not about absence; it's about presence.

The words third Eucharistic Prayer for Masses with Children capture this perfectly. The presider, speaking the Father on behalf of the assembly says: "Jesus now lives with you in glory, but he is also here on earth, among us."

'Ascension Thursday'

One might quite naturally ask, "Why do you speak of the ascension as part of the resurrection, when we've been told that he didn't ascend to heaven until 40 days later?" We have to distinguish between two different uses of the word "ascension."

(1) Most basically it refers to Jesus' movement through death and to God. Jesus' rising was in itself a "going somewhere," and that this "somewhere" was at the right hand of the Father," which means that Jesus' humanity is now with God, immersed in the glory of God. This was part of the resurrection, and we have no description of it in any of the Gospels because it is beyond words.

(2) After this had taken place, Jesus began to appear visibly to his disciples. It is not as though Jesus settled in with them for days at a time. These were sporadic manifestations which the disciples were privileged to receive. His "home" was at the right hand of God, and it was from there that he appeared. At some point these appearances came to an end. The fact that they ended is dramatized by a visible ascension of Jesus rising to the sky and no longer returning to them in this way. This ascension functions as his last appearance when he takes leave of his followers in visible form. It is this image of "ascension" that usually comes to mind when we hear that word. Let's look at how the different Gospel writers deal with this :

Matthew: [No account of a visible ascension.]

Mark: In the addition to the end of Mark's Gospel (not written by Mark, but still part of the canonical Gospel) we hear that on Easter Sunday Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, then to two disciples on a country road (these appearances are not described). Then Jesus appears to the eleven at table, and commissions them to go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel. Then we have a visible ascension:

So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. (Mk 16:19)

Luke: In his Gospel, Luke describes a visible ascension that takes place on Easter Sunday. The disciples were gathered together excitedly talking about appearances that had already taken place that day. In the middle of all this, the Lord appeared, spoke and ate with them. His visible ascension follows:

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, raised his hands, and blessed them. As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. (Lk 24:50-51)

John: [No account of a visible ascension.]

So, we have two Gospel accounts of a visible ascension, both taking place on Easter Sunday.

But we find another account in Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. He begins this volume by saying that Jesus appeared to the disciples "during 40 days" (a round number, and very biblical) and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. One time they were gathered with him on Mount Olivet and . . .
. . . as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven." (Acts 1:9-11)

After this, his presence and action through his Spirit will unfold throughout the next 28 chapters. (The "Spirit"

is mentioned 57 times in the Acts of the Apostles.)

Why would Luke have two different accounts -- one in his Gospel and another in Acts -- with a forty day discrepancy? It is his way of helping us understand the depths of what took place -- something like using slow motion so we can catch the details of something that happens quickly.

We have seen that Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit were really all parts of the one single event, each one flowing out of the other. He died and was buried late on Friday afternoon.

Sometime between then and early Sunday morning (we don't know exactly when) he was raised from the dead. His rising took him to the glory of heaven -- his ascension. By Sunday evening he appears to his disciples and breathes the Spirit upon them -- "Pentecost."

In our liturgical celebration of this we spread it out over many weeks so that we can take it all in -- which is what Luke did in his second volume: after the resurrection he appears to them at different times over the course of "40 days," then visibly ascends "into heaven," and then 10 days after that there is the dramatic outpouring of his Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost. Our 50 day Easter Season is patterned on Luke. We need time to let these events, and their implications for us, sink in.

The Ascension: The Destiny of All Creation

The ascension of Jesus in his humanity is a sign of things to come for all of us and for all creation. It is a great sign of hope, for it reveals the destiny God intends for the rest of us. Our homeland as human beings is heaven.

The theologian Karl Rahner describes the ascension as the feast of the future of creation. As he puts it, because of the ascension we are "the most sublime of materialists." We can no longer picture a future without matter. Flesh has been redeemed and glorified, which means that matter will last forever and be glorified forever.

Because of this, Rahner says that the ascension is the beginning of the transformation of all creation. When we celebrate this feast we celebrate the feast transfiguration of the world which has already begun and which, since the ascension, has been ripening and developing towards the point where one day it will be fulfilled.

Through his ascension, Christ has brought to God part of this earth. It is the beginning of what is to come, a cause for hope in a world that all too often is gloomy about its own future.

Leave the Candle Lit

Before the post-Vatican II restoration of the liturgy, there was a small ritual which took place at the Ascension Thursday Mass, a ritual that had crept in because the meaning of the Ascension had gradually been obscured. Immediately after the Gospel (which recounted the ascension) the acolyte went over and snuffed out the paschal candle, a symbol of the risen Christ among us. He had ascended, and he was gone.

We don't snuff out the candle any more. We have returned to a fuller appreciation that the ascension to a new form of human existence enabled Christ to break through the barriers of space and time and, through his Spirit, be with us in every time and place.

We have recognized that Christ's ascension is about presence, not absence.