



Ascension, Year B – May 21, 2009

Luke 24:44-53

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James J. Popham

In 1976 Gail Sheehy wrote a book called *Passages*. It described the transitional milestones of human life. I do not recall reading it. But I am reasonably certain she included no chapter on ascension. After all only a few people were recorded in Biblical history as ascending bodily into heaven. By the way, if you can name them all, you might consider auditioning for a spot on Jeopardy. "I'll take ascensions for \$200, Alex." But in the still modern era of the late 20th century, the notion of ascension was really just a bit much. If science could not explain it, it must be impossible. And, indeed, many of us might admit to a bit of skepticism when confronted with the image of Jesus rising into the clouds.

But a story of Jesus returning to his Father in heaven written in the late first century would not reflect the science of the 20th or 21st century. A gospel written in the first century would take into account the cosmology of that time. No worm holes to another dimension. No sliding into an alternate universe. No, "beam me up, Father." In the first century, heaven, where the gods lived, literally was above the earth. The only way to get there was up into the sky, through the clouds. So, of course, Jesus returning to his father in heaven, necessarily would ascend into the sky. That was how one would get to heaven. That is the only way the story would make sense in the first century. Had Jesus come in the 21st century, his return to heaven undoubtedly would have been described in terms of quantum physics. The point is that Jesus departed. And his departure could be understood only as a return to heaven, where God resided.

So, it is important not to get bogged down in the description or metaphor or science of Jesus' ascension. The more illuminating focus must be on what it meant to the early Christians and, therefore, what it means for us. Because, while our understanding of factual details might change with our developing understanding of the physical universe, the theological and practical implications of the event enjoy lasting significance.

Indeed, so much of what is said in even this few brief paragraphs of Luke's Gospel would lose meaning and significance if the Ascension were a fairy tale.

Why would Jesus do so much to equip his followers to carry on after his departure if he was not to depart them? As Luke's gospel recounts, Jesus opened the eyes and minds of his followers to the meaning of scripture. Why was this necessary? Because his message of love and forgiveness was radical and needed the credibility accorded it by a foundation in the Jewish Law, prophets, and psalms. New ideas go down much more easily when they flow from tradition, rather than supplant or eradicate it. If Jesus' followers were to undertake Jesus' commission to them, then they had to have a sound understanding of scripture in order to keep the message sound and on point. Jesus insured that they would.

Luke's gospel also tells of Jesus' reminding his disciples that they would be clothed with power from on high. God would fortify and literally encourage them – and us – to take up Jesus' mission after he has departed. Ultimately, the church would come to understand this divine sustenance and empowerment as the Holy Spirit.

Without the Ascension, Jesus' followers, including ourselves, would be left wondering when and where we might see him next. Without the Ascension, we would rather

easily neglect that Jesus sent his disciples, his followers – that's us – to carry on his mission. We would be waiting for him to appear, call another meeting, and tell us what to do – or better yet, just let Jesus do it himself, while we continue to follow him around uncomprehending, fearful, and often ineffectual, as his disciples so often seemed to do.

So, Gail Sheehy notwithstanding, the Ascension was and is a critical passage or transition. For Jesus, for his disciples, for his nascent church – and for us. In that moment, the torch was passed. Jesus' mission was handed off to his followers with their new understanding, their approaching empowerment, and their great joy.

Let us share that joy this evening. Let us celebrate the Ascension. Let us embrace its meaning. Let us undertake the mission Jesus intended for us. To spread the good news of love, of forgiveness, of the promise of his return. And, after all, how could we believe in his return if he had not first been here and then left, returning, ascending, if you will, to rejoin his father in heaven.

Amen.