

“God Only Knows!”

Acts 1:6-11
Hebrews 4:14-16

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Ascension Celebration

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*“We...have a High Priest
who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses.”*
(Hebrews 4:15-16)

In the grocery store, I picked the wrong checkout-line... *again!* The clerk up there was talking with a customer, but no groceries were getting bagged. Nothing was moving.

Finally an exasperated husband behind me blurted out, “What’s the hang up?” His wife wheezed, “God only knows!”

She didn’t sound angry or irreverent. It seemed more like a simple statement of fact. If anyone knew what the hang up was, it could only be God! “God only knows!”

Spiritually Present

This pesky – yet familiar little incident – serves to introduce the Ascension of our Lord.

This High-Holy Day always occurs on a Thursday, forty days after Easter. This is why we usually miss it. Did anyone greet you this past Thursday with “Happy Ascension Day”?

Probably not! So, today, let’s join in celebrating our Lord’s Ascension as Christians have done since Bible times. It says:

*“We have a great High Priest
who has passed into the heavens,
Jesus, the Son of God.”*
(Hebrews 4:14)

Some fret about the Ascension because it seems to require Christians to hold an outmoded model of a ‘three-story’ universe. You know, hell in the basement, earth at ground level and heaven upstairs where Jesus ‘Ascended.’

To make matters even more uncomfortable, science reminds us that on a rotating spherical planet there is no absolute ascending-*up* or descending-*down*.

And so, to parody Scripture, ‘What shall we say to these things? If science and logical thought be against us, what can be for us?’

A great deal it turns out! Start with this – the Ascension is not about transportation. Jesus did not ascend *in order to reach his Father in heaven*. Jesus Ascended *to visually teach his disciples* that he was returning to his Father.

During his resurrection appearances Jesus had begun teaching his disciples not to rely on their senses to confirm His presence with them.

Mary Magdalene *heard* Jesus call her name, whirled around and only then recognized him. Jesus told her, “*Do not cling to me.*” Depend not on *sound* to confirm Jesus’ presence – rely only on faith.

The Emmaus Road disciples *recognized* Jesus when he broke bread with them. Immediately He disappeared from view. The lesson was do not depend on *sight* to confirm Jesus’ presence – rely only on faith.

Thomas refused to believe Jesus was alive until he *touched* him. Yet Jesus blessed those who believe without any tactile evidence. Depend not on *touch* to confirm Jesus’ presence – rely only on faith.

The Ascension taught the disciples – and teaches us still! – that Christ’s presence is not about what our ears hear, or our eyes see, or our hands touch. “*We walk by faith,*” Paul insisted, “*not by sight*” (II Corinthians 5:7).

The Humanity of God

But first, let’s take a step back and try to put the Ascension in perspective. Here is what Christians have always believed about the Ascension.

“*We have One
who in every respect
has been tested as we are,
yet without sin.*”
(Hebrews 4:15)

In John’s Gospel Jesus makes it clear: “*No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man*” (John 3:13).

The Christ, whose Ascension we are celebrating, is the very same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, ministered in Galilee and died in Jerusalem.

Our faith professes that Christ remains as fully human in his Ascended glory, as he was human in the days of His flesh. This is orthodox Christian doctrine.

Christians do not hold (what is sometimes called) a ‘dive-bomber theology.’ In the Second World War, you remember, dive-bombers dropped out of the sky, performed their mission and swooped back up into the heavens.

Christians do not believe Jesus dropped out of heaven and divested himself of divinity in order to become human. Nor do we believe Christ divested himself of humanity in order to Ascend into heaven as divine.

A more accurate image of what we believe is contained in a verse from the hymn we used at the start of Worship today.

*“Crown Him the Lord of love;
behold His hands and side,
rich wounds, yet visible above,
in beauty glorified.”*

The upshot, then, is this. Just as Christ’s human nature is retained in His Ascended glory, so is Christ’s knowledge of the human struggle retained in His Ascended glory. Our grocery store checkout-line theologian had it right, ‘God knows!’

Sometimes those of us who grew up in the church forget how absolutely unique is the Christian understanding of God.

- Stoic philosophers conceived of god as unaffected by mortal trials. For Stoics, then, god is insensitive to human struggles.
- Epicurean philosophers imagined god living in perfect happiness. For the Epicureans, god was detached from human sorrow and sin.
- Deists believe god created the world, but is irrevocably removed from it. For Deists, god is totally disinterested in the human spirit.

Christians go beyond our worldly guesses. Instead, we believe the revealed Good News. God walked among us in the humanity of Jesus Christ. Therefore, God knows our human frailties quite personally.

God Sympathizes

Down the centuries, Christians have maintained their faith in the God whom others could not even conceive of.

*“We have a High Priest
who is able to sympathize
with our weaknesses.”*

(Hebrews 4:15)

The word ‘sympathy’ comes from two Greek words: *sun*, meaning ‘together’ and *pathos* meaning ‘suffering.’ *Sympathy* (*sum-pathos*) literally means ‘suffering together-with’ another.

In Jesus, God ‘suffers with us.’ He knows the temptations that defeat us, the pain that preoccupies us, the grief that wounds us, the loneliness that isolates us.

The old spiritual song put it so well, “Nobody knows the trouble I seen, *nobody knows but Jesus.*”

Christ does not need our prayers to inform Him about our weaknesses or our failings. He already knows our sins and struggles, which begs the question, ‘Then, why should we pray at all?’

Maybe we could think of it this way. At times in our lives we have all needed another with whom we could share our personal distress. In times like that many of us were not looking for advice or counsel.

We simply wanted someone to hear us out, understand our wounds, enter into our pain and suffer it along with us.

If you’ve ever had an experience like this, you know the release of finally feeling, “I’m not alone. I’m not the first person to

face this. Nor do I have to slog through it all-by-myself. There is another who understands what I’m feeling and walks with me through the pain and confusion.”

We believe Christ is supremely that ‘other.’ We should not be surprised that Christ understands. He lived our life. What we suffer – Christ suffered! What we face – He faced! He knows our human condition and offers himself to us.

The Wounded Healer

This is why we pray. Prayer does not inform God about our needs. Prayer informs us about God’s presence and love.

“Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

(Hebrews 4:16)

Henry Nouen wrote wisely and well about the need for spiritual sensitivity in all our relationships. He coined the phrase ‘*Wounded Healers.*’ This was his insight. The most deeply wounded among us are best able to help others who are similarly wounded.

God wastes nothing! In God’s hands, even our wounds are transformed into instruments of healing for others who are also wounded.

Lately we've been hearing a lot about 'Wounded Warriors.' These brave men and women have put themselves in harm's way to protect our freedoms and our lives.

Many a brave warrior has survived battles only to suffer the lacerations of war. Yet it is these very heroes who are best able to understand and encourage other veterans, also broken in body, mind or spirit. 'Wounded Healers' heal the wounded.

Jesus Christ is our ultimate 'Wounded Healer.' Referring to Christ, listen to the Scripture that tells how "we are healed."

*"He was wounded
for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities:
upon Him was the punishment
that made us whole, and
by his bruises we are healed."*
(Isaiah 53:5)

In order for a soldier of lower rank to speak personally and openly with a superior officer, he or she must first of all secure "Permission to speak freely."

Christ, our Ascended Superior, has granted us "Permission to speak freely." When in prayer we tell our Ascended Lord about our wounds and failings, He understands and responds to us with "sympathy...mercy...and grace."

No wonder we love the hymn, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. As we sing, take special note of the second verse:

*Have we trials and temptation?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful,
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
take it to the Lord in prayer!*