

Rev. Dr. Yugo Suzuki's Sermon

6/5/2011 Jesus Ascended to Heaven – What Does it Mean? Luke 24: 44-53

Today is Ascension Sunday. It commemorates Jesus' ascension to heaven after his resurrection. For that, Luke uses a spatial metaphor: Jesus was lifted up to the sky.

Taken literally, Jesus ascension reminds us of the take-off of the space shuttle that we saw on television recently. In our contemporary mindset, however, such a metaphor may elicit laughter, even derision. That's why we need to understand what Jesus' ascension intends to convey.

Let us go over its episode.

Jesus after the resurrection appears to the disciples and commands them to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people of every nation throughout the world. He promises that he will be with them in their endeavor. Then he is taken up to heaven.

What does all this mean? Is it simply an incredulous, supernatural miracle story? No, it is much more profound than that. Its meaning is at least four-fold.

First, the Ascension episode emphasizes what Easter has already emphasized: the presence of the resurrected Jesus is no longer confined to Galilee and Jerusalem. Nor is his presence confined to the first century A.D.

The ascension of Jesus means that now his message forever transcends space and time.

What is Jesus' message that transcends space and time? This is the second point. His message is this: God is like the good shepherd who spends all night in the wilderness, looking for one single lost sheep until he finds it. The God is like the compassionate and loving father who forgives and welcomes home his prodigal son who squandered his life saving.

Now our third point. Jesus calls every one of them to be a messenger of his message, a witness to God's grace, an earthen vessel of his love and justice. That will not be easy. But the disciples are assured that Jesus will be with them in the Holy Spirit no matter what.

Our fourth point of the Ascension episode is this. Jesus gives the disciples the certainty that they have a friend not only on earth but through death and after death.

Surely it is the most priceless thing of all to know and to feel that in eternal life there awaits us the same Jesus who on earth was wondrous kind. Therefore, to die is not to go out into the dark or to nothingness; it is to go to God.

The Ascension of Jesus is not a supernatural miracle story that repels modern minds. It demonstrates in a spatial metaphor the crux of Christian faith. In short, the Ascension story is a story for us today.

The same Jesus who was with the twelve is with us today. God is infinitely gracious to us today as he was then. He is pure and unbounded love today as he was then. God calls us Christians to be his earthen vessels today as he did then. We are not afraid of death today, for nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Jesus is our true friend on earth, through death and after death.

How empowering an affirmation! How comforting a proclamation!

Thanks be to God.