

**SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE, SUNDAY JUNE 11.**  
**THE FEAST OF THE ASCENSION. THE REVEREND HELEN GIBSON-WHITE**

**THE ASCENSION**

The Ascension of Jesus into heaven is an important festival in the churches' year – but one that is apt to get lost, coming as it does on a week day (Thursday), the fortieth day after Easter. The Feast of the Ascension was Thursday, May 25<sup>th</sup> this year,

The window here at St Andrew's depicting the Ascension of Jesus in its position in the sanctuary immediately holds your attention as you enter the church. So today we shall give attention to the Ascension, and not lose sight of its meaning and importance. "As the disciples were watching, (Jesus) was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." (Acts 1:9).

If you or I are to give a message in a way that convinces people that it is true, we have to be convinced of it ourselves. We can only be convincing when we are convinced. As he wrote his book *Emmanuel*, Herbert O'Driscoll held imaginary conversations with St John. This is a part of one such imaginary conversation:-

*O'Driscoll:-* Can I tell you a reason that I am writing this book? I am writing it because I want Christians to learn again that when asked their beliefs about the Lord Jesus they should always reply with the word, "Yes." So many begin with ghastly stutterings such as, "Well, it all depends on ..."

*St John:-* You mean when one is asked about the really important things, like Jesus was born, and died, and rose and ascended.

*O'Driscoll:-* Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Even if we feel the need to explain how we believe these things, we should always begin by making it quite clear that we do believe them.

On the occasions when Jesus appeared after his resurrection he "opened their minds" as it was described, to understand that all that had been said by the prophets in scripture was fulfilled in him. The disciples became so convinced of this truth, and their faith grew so rock-solid, that hundreds, thousands of people also became convinced.

Luke wrote the gospel of Luke, and a second volume, The Acts Of The Apostles. The very last verses of the gospel describe Jesus' ascension, and so does the opening chapter of Acts, marking the end of the account of his earthly ministry as recounted in the gospel. In the opening of the next chapter, there is the account of Jesus' continuing work through the Holy Spirit.

It may seem surprising when we read that the disciples were joyful when Jesus was parted from them. But they were grasping the significance of what had happened.

What does the Ascension mean for us? What do we make of it? Remember the view of those days that heaven was "up there" in the sky, and also that God's presence was signified by cloud (as the cloud on Mt Sinai and the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land).

Whether we believe literally in the account of the Ascension, or whether we see it as the disciples' attempt to put into words the inexpressible, there needed to be a definite break with the situation as it had been. Why?

The reason is that until the Ascension, people had been dependent on Jesus' physical presence. He could be in only one place at one time, and people could be with him only where he was. There had to come a time when the change was made from this dependence on being with him physically, to knowing and depending on his spiritual presence, known by faith through the Holy Spirit. If Jesus had simply stopped appearing to his disciples as he had been doing after the resurrection, they would surely have always been looking for him, half expecting him to appear, and being distracted and therefore relatively powerless to carry on the work Jesus had left them to do. However, the Ascension happened, and something happened that allowed them to understand and accept that he had gone from their physical sight. Maybe, as we hear the phrase so often today, it brought them "closure."

As Luke said, they were not in the least sad – far from it – they knew they had the promise of the Holy Spirit. They had Jesus' promise that it was to their advantage that he go away, but that he would always be with them, still there, and in a more intimate relationship than ever. Our ability to carry out the mission Jesus has left to us is also completely dependent on that relationship.

Where would we be if Jesus had not ascended into heaven? Where would we be if all we had were records that he had once lived as an historic figure? With the passing of generations and centuries, the distance between us and him would grow greater and greater, and he would become more and more remote, no longer our Lord present with us.

The Ascension directs us to the fact that Jesus is always and universally available. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it this way: "Being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation." So the more than two thousand years between his earthly life and ours makes no difference at all.

Dr William Wolf writing in *Man's Knowledge of God* said "The Christ who was bound in his earthly life to the body of a Jew living in Palestine within a definite span of years, must become available, apart from the limitations of space and time, to people of faith in all places and in all times. That is the significance of the Ascension of Christ - to sit, as the Creed puts it, "on the right hand of the Father." What is stressed is not his disappearance, but his universal availability ... the change of the historical Jesus into the universal Christ, available to us and to all believers everywhere."

Jesus' presence remains with his church. He promised to be with us always, to never leave us or forsake us, and that where two or three are gathered in his name, he would be there with them. He also stressed the necessity that the relationship between him and us continue, by telling us that without him we can do nothing; we can't do his work if we rely on ourselves. "Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high," i.e., the Holy Spirit, whose coming we celebrated last Sunday at Pentecost. Words for disciples of all ages.

The Ascension – Jesus available to believers of all ages and nations, also means that he is available in our own individual experience.

These two aspects – the universal and the personal – fit together, each making the other possible. A world-wide universal Christ must be connected with individual human experience, or he would simply be a kind of “principle of goodness” without the power to be our Lord and Saviour. On the other hand, if we see him only as the Christ of individual experience, we limit his power and love. As he prayed to his Father, Jesus said, “I glorified you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.” (John 17:4). Having completed his work on earth, having entrusted the task of carrying it on to his little group of disciples, he entered into heaven, marking the beginning of the relationship we can have with him today.

We are the church militant - the church here on earth - and we say, “We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses,” - the church triumphant – those who have gone before us to heaven.

To go back to O’Driscoll and *St John*: - “I’m glad you put a lot of people into your book. Do you know why Matthew, Mark, Luke and I ... why we all put a lot of people into our books? It was because men and women and children are why it all happened. The Lord Jesus came so that you and I and everyone might have life – don’t ever forget that.”

Then, *O’Driscoll said*, “John had gone – a strange thing happened. It seemed for a moment that there were others behind him, and the room seemed to be full. I had a strange feeling that somehow I knew them all and that they knew me. It was a funny feeling, like meeting a huge family you know you had, had been told about, but never met.”

Jesus ascended to become universally present to people of faith in all places, to all generations, at all times.