



Opening Prayer

Your love, O God, rules all, and your Christ is forever close to your heart. Uncloud our spirits, unfetter our lips, set free the joy that too often subsides behind familiarity, or is forced into a corner by our reticence or formality. Let us thank you with unabashed delight, and through the hallowed gifts of precious music and thoughtful words, praise you with uninhibited worship. Through this same Christ Jesus, our ascended Brother and Lord. **Amen.**

Hymn Ye servants of God (StF 340) *Charles Wesley* <https://youtu.be/YlkufB03P5I>

Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad his wonderful name ;
the name all-victorious of Jesus extol ;
his kingdom is glorious, and rules over all.

'Salvation to God who sits on the throne !'
Let all cry aloud and honour the Son ;
the praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,
fall down on their faces, and worship the Lamb.

God ruleth on high, almighty to save ;
and still he is nigh, his presence we have ;
the great congregation his triumph shall sing,
ascribing salvation to Jesus our King.

Then let us adore and give him his right ;
all glory and power, all wisdom and might,
all honour and blessing, with angels above,
and thanks never ceasing, and infinite love.

Scripture Luke 24.44-53

Sermon

Today it is Ascension Sunday! If you think Easter Day and its theme of rising from the dead is a challenge to the modern mind set... well, Ascension beats it hands down in terms of its sceptical believability in the common mind. I mean, at least every year the daffodils rise from the dead to live and bloom and die again! But there is no equivalent whatsoever in nature to the widespread idea that the risen Jesus has gone up to a place called heaven from where he reigns now. Even if we get intellectually impatient with the cartoon of Jesus' feet about to disappear into the clouds, the NT explanation of Jesus' ascension to heaven slams into the brick wall of our common intellect. The cynic simply scoffs with the rhetoric: if Jesus somehow developed the ability to ascend like a rocket, we would still be able to detect him a mere 2000 years later with our telescopes – even if he could travel at the speed of light.

But, let the cynic be gently reminded of this: When the dinosaurs walked the earth the possibilities inherent in marshalling and exploiting the elements of nature (...aeroplanes, microwave ovens, television transmitters, and so much more) were all there waiting to be discovered. Here we are, 65 million years later and these things have become commonplace in a mere century. That fact alone should prevent us ever scoffing about what can or cannot be! At the moment, though, the capability of our current language and the limits of our present imagination make it all but impossible to *fully* appreciate *now* what *we know* future generations of our grandchildren *will* find commonplace. For example, when my great grandfather's peers were pursuing their adult lives around the early 1800s, they would not have had the language or the imagination to discuss a Zoom meeting, or open-heart surgery, or the splitting of the atom, or the unseen world of micro-organisms and viruses. **We**, however, can appreciate the ironical fact that even though we cannot yet imagine it or speak of it we know that truly wonderful things will come to pass. Our inclination to scoff at what can or cannot be is now healthily diminished.

However, my response to the cynic regarding the ascension of Jesus isn't just a caution to not dismiss what we don't currently understand. We can say something more positive than that. Clearly, Luke the Gospel writer, could not have imagined our understanding of sending a rocket to Mars or our talk about galaxies beyond the galaxies beyond our galaxy.

So, what are we to make of his pictorial language with regard to Jesus' ascension? Is Luke describing, as best he could, what they literally saw happen on a day in the calendar in a geographical location on our planet? Or is Luke describing something else? Considering all that went before it, I am sure Luke is describing something else AND attempting to signal what it means. I say that because we know that Luke's understanding of creation was that it

was a three-decker universe. The amazing Jesus Event had taken place during our history in our physical location called earth. Underneath the earth was the frightening place of the dead. Above the earth was the wondrous place of the angels. The appearances of the risen Jesus **would** come to an end. He had told them so. What, therefore, would happen to him? And what would that mean? Since Jesus had conquered death, he would surely not permanently descend under the earth. Indeed, the day is coming when he will call forth all the dead and they will rise from their graves. The only other place where Jesus could possibly be, then, **is 'up'** in the world of the angels.

At this point our intellect kicks in and forces us to realise that Luke is describing **where** the crucified and risen Jesus is now. Luke, however, clearly does not have the language to describe **how** it has come to be. That didn't stop him trying! However, let us not be distracted from the more important issue. Since the appearances of the risen Jesus had come to an end, or at least were imminent when Luke was writing, that crucial question hangs in the air: where is the crucified and risen Jesus now? Also, in the absence (going forward) of the risen Jesus' footprints in the sand, how can the earliest of his followers literally continue to follow him? In other words, what does the fact that he is now gone mean? What does the physical absence of the risen Jesus mean for the future of his Movement? Furthermore, when his promised Return – imminently expected – became more and more 'delayed' what did the delay mean? Here WE are 2000 years later and still the delay goes on – what does it all mean?

Just before we move on to address this let me illustrate once more the limitations of language so that we go forward from here able to be open to the possibility of "the more" that lies beyond those present limitations. We are all likely to be aware of – or even have experienced – the phenomenon of a Zoom meeting. The common experience of the Zoom meeting demonstrates an apparent impossibility: that we can be both present and absent at the same time. Normally we would say it is impossible for us to be both present and absent at the same time. Yet, the Zoom meeting challenges the inadequacy of that statement. Indeed, this sermon was recorded for YouTube. If you were watching, listening to, and engaging with me on the YouTube video would I be present to you or absent while you were watching?

The most important aspect of our celebrations today is this: the Ascension of Jesus is a part of our ongoing celebration of the risen Christ's presence with us and all who came before us and with all who will come after us. While walking the streets as one of us, Jesus could only be in one place at a time (even as the risen Jesus), but his ascension means that the one place where he is present is now bigger than all the places we could possibly go. Now instead of occupying one place in the universe, our universe and all the others, now occupy one place in Christ. Think of it this way. If you stand with your nose almost touching **a great oak tree**, you will see only a fraction of the tree. The further back you go the more of the tree you can see and make sense of. So, if instead of Christ occupying one place in the universe, the universe now occupies one place in Christ, then we can no longer stand back far enough to see him and make *final and complete* sense of him.

Our perception of the risen Christ's physical absence is a real experience, and it needs to be taken seriously as part of our struggle to be the people God would have us be. But just because the experience is real, it doesn't mean our perception of it is accurate. Part of the journey of healing and growth into the full likeness of Jesus, the full destiny for which we were all created, is to begin to live into this bewildering paradox of knowing the presence of the risen messiah who seems absent to all our sensory faculties, but who yet is more all-embracingly present than ever. One of the Celtic prayers of Iona puts it like this: 'Christ has ascended into heaven to be everywhere present.' In other words, he has not left us behind so that he can go off to enjoy some distant heaven, but to fill that heaven **that is all around us**, so that as the psalmist put it, 'whether I fly towards the dawn or plunge down to the depths of the earth, even there I find I am still in your hands.'

This is **the great mystery** we celebrate today. Even when Jesus is indisputably dead, yet behold, he is more alive than any of us. And even when he departs, behold he is present with us and embraces us all in the glorious love and grace of God. Hallelujah!

Prayer

We give you all thanks and praise, O God, for you are the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last who shields the lives of those who love you. You laid the foundation of the world, and will come in glory to bring all things to fulfilment. Wrapped in thunder clouds and throned on justice, you led your people by fire into the land of promise. In your child, Jesus, you came to us as the promised descendant of David, with a love that revealed your glory even in suffering and death. When you raised him from the grave, the strongholds of death were shaken, and the chains

of captivity were broken, freeing everyone to follow him into oneness with you. Now you are in us, and we are in you, and the waters of life wash our wounds and satisfy our deepest thirst.

Therefore, with our hearts lifted high, we offer you thanks and praise at all times through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(We sing, unaccompanied, the Doxology):

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise him all creatures here below
Praise him above you heavenly host
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.**

Holy Friend, loving God and Saviour, we pray to you, both when we are at our wits end and on those days when we feel reasonably capable and competent. We ask you to bless our attempts in aiding all the lonely, suffering, bewildered, and grieving people on earth.

Yet our efforts, even at their best, towards loving our neighbours are piecemeal. Sometimes, in spite of our good intentions, our efforts are ill advised and ill directed.

Please do for our fellow human beings all that we cannot do for each other. May no child of earth face distress or calamity on their own.

Please guide and bless those who seem to have the knack of loving others in appropriate, practical ways. Give each of us the commitment and wisdom to express our compassion more wisely and lovingly.

In the stillness, let us intercede privately with God for those things of personal concern....

Loving God, to you all persons are precious. Teach us your ways. Let no person be forgotten, none neglected, none despised, and none judged as unworthy of the best care that is available. Bring the day nearer when your people on earth may be more like a community of grace, mercy and peace. Through Christ Jesus, our exalted Brother and Lord.
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn Now thank we all our God (StF 81) *Martin Rinkart tr. Catherine Winkworth* <https://youtu.be/iLjJBFIXR0>

Now thank we all our God,
With hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done,
In whom his world rejoices;
Who from our mother's arms
Has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us;

And keep us in his grace
And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills
In this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God
The Father now be given,
The Son, and him who reigns
With them in highest heaven,
The one eternal God,
Whom earth and heaven adore,
For thus it was, is now,
And shall be evermore.

Blessing

Let us go in peace, for we go in the name of Christ, to the glory of the Father, in the power of the Spirit of God. **Amen.**