

## Ascension Day 2015 – ‘Look up’

The story is told about the Ascension Day celebrations at a particular seminary. A special Ascension Day service was held and the whole seminary in robes and regalia gathered for the big celebration. It was quite an event. The service ended and, amidst clouds of incense, the assembly emerged from the chapel singing some great ascension hymn. Unknown to the worshippers, a somewhat creative student had found one a near life-size Christmas crèche figure - the hollow, plastic painted kind - and stuffed it with fireworks – the sky rocket type. As the procession marched into the courtyard, the student lit the fuse, sending the statue soaring up out of the shrubbery through a cloud of smoke and sparks. It buzzed over the scattering members of the procession, finally taking a nosedive on to the roof of a nearby building. There the ascension rocket sputtered and died. The head of the seminary was not impressed with the student’s explanation that he was simply trying to dramatise his faith in the ascension of Jesus.

At least one thing can be said about that Ascension Day celebration is that it was never forgotten. But as a rule Ascension Day is hardly remembered. There is no special holiday to mark the occasion. It was work as usual for most of us today. I imagine that even many Christians barely remembered Christ’s ascension to heaven as they went about their busy lives today.

We don’t talk about Jesus ascending to heaven very much because to the modern mind it is quite humorous to think of a man suddenly lifting off the ground and disappearing behind the clouds. Perhaps images of the cartoon character Superman comes to mind, who had the ability to just lift up his arms and take off into the sky.

The whole pre-scientific concept that Jesus went up to heaven defies modern understanding of the universe. "Up where?", people ask. "Into outer space, a planet, a star?" The Ascension story doesn’t fit into modern thinking anymore; it’s not mentioned in the Bible very much and it falls on a workday. We might ask the question: who needs it?

Yet the Ascension is not just a theological oddity. It remains a foundational part of our faith. As Sean White put it in *Feasting on the Word*, ‘no other festival in the Christian year is more important and less emphasized than the ascension of the Lord.’ But why? What’s the big deal?

As I was praying about what to say this evening, I felt prompted to summarise tonight’s message in 2 words: ‘LOOK UP’. I was struck by the words of a poem I came across this week by Walter Brueggemann. It is a challenge to do just this, to look up, and it is called *Candidates for Newness*:

*We live in the long stretch between  
Easter and Pentecost, scarcely noticing.  
We hear mention of the odd claim of ascension.  
We easily recite the creed "He ascended into heaven."  
We bow before such quaint language and move on,  
immune to ascent,  
indifferent to enthronement,  
unresponsive to new governance.*

*It is reported that behind the ascending son was  
the majestic Father riding the clouds;  
But we do not look up much;  
we stay close to the ground, to business and  
to busyness,  
to management and control.*

*Our world of well-being has a very low  
ceiling, but we do not mind the closeness  
or notice the restrictiveness.  
It will take at least a Pentecost wind to  
break open our vision enough to imagine a new governance...*

*Until then, we stay jaded,  
but for all that,  
no less candidates for newness.*

We do not look up much... So tonight let's look up. And let's do that for 2 reasons:

**LOOK UP because Jesus is enthroned as King.** At Jesus' ascension he is installed as the true king of the world. According to the Apostles' Creed, he "ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." Jesus is taken up to heaven in a cloud (Acts 1:9–11), and later in Acts Stephen declares that he sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). These texts suggest that Jesus' ascension fulfils the important prophecy of Daniel 7:13–14.

*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*

Jesus' kingdom cannot be destroyed and will not pass away! According to Revelation 3:21 Jesus conquered and sat down with his Father on his throne, where he receives unending praise (Revelation 5:6–13). According to Psalms, Jesus will reign at God's right hand until all enemies are subdued under his feet (Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:34–35; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Hebrews 1:13). Thus God's kingdom has been inaugurated through the enthronement of Jesus, who now sits on heaven's throne and will return to consummate his kingdom on earth as in heaven.

LOOK UP! Jesus is king. And the Ascension proves it, the Ascension reminds us who he is. And maybe that's a message we need to hear again and again. Life takes it out of us, doesn't it? So many other challenges, so many nay-sayers. But we know who the king is, the king of endless glory. Look up – Jesus is king!

Secondly, LOOK UP, because the Spirit is coming. Jesus promises his followers that they 'will be clothed with power from on high.' Real power – the power to live for Jesus, to witness for him, to develop our characters, to receive gifts, to form the community of his people. But the Spirit comes to those who look up and ask for it. It is the Spirit of Jesus. And he loves to send his Spirit on those who seek after him.

So much of the time, I find myself looking down. Down at the pavement to avoid tripping up. Down at my keyboard. Down at all the guinea pig straw on our carpet. But every now and again I need to be reminded to look up. We've had reasons to recently: up at the solar eclipse, up at the beautiful blossom on the trees. Let's not forget why so many churches are built with these huge high ceilings – to lift our eyes towards heaven. Look up! Look up tonight, because Jesus is king. And look up because power is available from high, the Spirit is coming.

I know the angels finish by telling the disciples to get going and not look up any longer – but they'd been doing that for quite a while. I think most of us have some catching up to do. Look up. The king is exalted, where he truly belongs. And where we too will belong, by his grace, for all eternity.