

“Where Did the Body Go?”
Psalm 68:1-10, 17-20 | Acts 1:3-14
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A few weeks ago, I visited a long-time couple in our church. I was chatting with one of them on their deep leather couch. Naturally, I’m short enough that my feet couldn’t reach the floor, so I had them curled up under me as we talked. The springtime blossoms of a beautiful tree bloomed in the garden behind us. I was very calmly sipping some ginger tea when this parishioner shifted a bit in their seat and took in a breath.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” they started.

I perked up a bit and focused my attention. “Sure, go ahead,” I replied. I really had no frame-of-reference for what this question could be. Perhaps, they wanted to ask something about the church or my position. Did they want to talk about something I had said during a sermon or a prayer? Had they, perhaps, been dying to tell me they wanted to join a committee (the perennial hope of a pastor)?

No, it was none of the above. “So, the Resurrection is one thing,” they said. “But, the Ascension....I just have to ask: *where did the body go?*”

Where did the body go?

So, when I saw the lectionary readings this week, I knew I needed to include this conversation. (My reaction)

When we are faced with difficult theological questions, we can sometimes have the knee-jerk reaction to chalk up a challenging or mind-bending passage from Scripture or encounter with the divine as simply “the mysteries of our faith.”

“We don’t really know, do we?”

“It’s beyond our human comprehension.”

“These sort of things rely on faith.”

We may not know what to say, or even what we believe, when we encounter a particularly thorny, biblical question. We may feel embarrassed to not know all of the answers—or, even one answer that feels suitable. We want to prove to others that we are competent, knowledgeable, and confident. If we see approval and affirmation on the faces of others, then, perhaps, we can approve of and affirm ourselves.

For those of us who have been churchgoers for some time, we may feel ashamed to admit what we do not know. We may prefer to stay quiet in our doubt than show our curiosity, lest it be perceived as ignorance. We may struggle with particular views of the church or have to reread a Scripture passage several times to wrap our head around it.

In preparation for today’s worship service, I wanted to do some research on the Ascension of Christ. Bible historians believe that Acts and the Gospel of Luke share the same author. This means, of course, that there are many parallels between the two books. Only Acts and Luke contain these brief scenes of Christ’s ascension. Acts’ portrayal of the ascension reads as follows: from Acts 1:9-10, “After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going away and as they were staring toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them.” The presence of two angels or two otherworldly beings is a common feature in the New Testament when a particularly significant occurrence happens in the life of Jesus—the Transfiguration and the Resurrection, for example. And, here is how Luke presents the ascension: from Luke 24:50-53, “When Jesus had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed

them. 51 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”

Stick with me here, because we are going to do a little Koine Greek exercise. The Koine for “he was lifted up” in Acts 1:9 is αὐτῶν ἐπήρθη (*auton epairón*). “Epairon,” the verb, means to lift up, to raise, or to exalt. The Koine for Luke 24’s “was taken up” is ἀναφέρω (*anaphero*), which means to bring, carry up, or offer up. Depending on how you translate these verbs, the Acts passage could read as such: “he was *exalted*, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” *Exaltation*, a worshipful act, feels completely different to me than the movement implied by “he was lifted up.” Similarly, the meaning can change just based on the translation of the verb in Luke 24: “he was was taken up into heaven” could also have been “he was *offered up* into heaven.” This translation seems like a reminder of Christ’s death for the love of the world.

If the idea of the Ascension wasn’t complicated enough for you, we always have ancient grammar to make it *that much* harder.

Beyond grammar, I wanted to learn what scholars had been saying about the Ascension. I am just a pastor, so I don’t have all of the training that an academic might. I reviewed my notes from my seminary New Testament course, and I couldn’t find any mention. I listened to a podcast with a professor from Princeton Theological Seminary on the historical evidence of the Resurrection, but there was no discussion of the Ascension. I then consulted two other sources: a well-known textbook on the New Testament and commentary on the Book of Acts. While the textbook explored the themes of Acts, there was no direct reference to the Ascension. I had a little more luck

with the commentary, however, but I can't say that I struck gold. Out of a one-hundred-plus book, there was one page on the Ascension. Here is what the commentary author, Charles C. Williamson, wrote about the Resurrected Christ's return to God:

For many people today, the account of the ascension of Jesus seems out of sync with our more scientific, sophisticated worldview. It was all right for the disciples with their primitive ideas of a three-story universe, but we know that heaven is not 'up'--as if someone could hop a ride on a space shuttle and climb higher and higher until finally reaching heaven. Nevertheless, the ascension of Jesus is one of the central tenets of [the Protestant] faith; [many traditions] say it when we repeat the Apostles' Creed -- 'He ascended into heaven.' ...[Williamson continues,] What are we saying when we affirm a belief in the ascension of Jesus? We are affirming that Jesus who died and was raised from the dead now sits at the right hand of God.... The ascension of Jesus is God's final confirmation of Jesus.... The ascension of Jesus is not about direction--that Jesus is going 'up.' Rather it is that Jesus is returning to God from whom he had come in his birth at Bethlehem. [End quote]

The ascension of Jesus is not about direction--that Jesus is going 'up.' Rather it is that Jesus is returning to God from whom he had come in his birth at Bethelhem.

When you think about it, Jesus never had a very *typical* or *usual* body. Jesus subverted nearly every expectation of human possibility while he was on earth. He was born of the Holy Spirit. He could heal the sick and raise the dead and perform miracles just with the touch of his hand. He glowed a radiant light at his transfiguration. He died and was resurrected and appeared to his followers in all manners of strange and mysterious ways--perhaps, even walking through doors or the heavy rock of his own tomb. Does this history make Jesus's ascension--the dematerialization of the body into a cloud of witness--more or less plausible? Do we need historical or physical evidence--the bones of Jesus's body, for example--to apply spiritual meaning to our

lives? Do we need to wrestle with ancient grammar and word choices to find meaning, or can we just sit with the text and our musings?

And, is it okay to admit our doubts and skepticism with the pastor, with each other, with even ourselves? As Charles C. Williamson indicated, perhaps it benefits us more, as followers of Christ, to consider the direction of Jesus as not going “up” to God, but rather going “toward” God. Could we consider how we may ascend *towards* God in our spiritual lives when doubts and skepticism emerge?

Here is what we know, time and time again, that the Bible tells us—here is the good news, and this is how we can move *towards* God in times of doubt. We were created by God. We are love, for God created us with love. God asks us to consider and care for the widow, the orphan, the lonely, the persecuted, and the poor in spirit and resources. God asks us to be stewards of Creation. God asks us to forgive often and do unto others as you would have others do until you. God inspired the works and lives of our Scripture authors, but God did not write the Scriptures. All humans see life through their own stories, perspectives, biases, and realities, and those stories, perspectives, biases, and realities jump out to us on the text as modern readers who *were not there during Jesus’s time or the time of the creation of the early church*. We were not there, so we trust in the guiding power of God that led our ancestors in faith to write their testimonies. We trust in the power of God to lead us to love, justice, fellowship, and resurrection of the self and the world. We trust that God may lead us to our own ascension into whom God is calling us to be.

Friends, it is part of human nature and spiritual growth to doubt and to wonder. When our minds are working and our hearts are stirring to learn more, read deeply, and

explore, we can be sure that the Spirit is beside us. *Go on!* She seems to say. *Keep going! Keep learning! Keep growing!* What a blessing this is.

May the God of all of us help us ascend to a higher, more loving, and more Christ-like version of ourselves. May we, with God's help, move *toward* God, seeking guidance and reassurance, as we do so. Amen.