

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 26, 2019
Rev. Dr. David Thompson**

The Full-Blown Mystery of the Ascension

Text: Acts 1:9

“After saying this, he was taken up to heaven as they watched him, and a cloud hid him from their sight.”

Shakespeare’s Hamlet said: “There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

When I was in Sacramento, I invited Bishop Spong to Westminster Presbyterian Church where I was Pastor Head of Staff.

The place was full to the gills. He has a large following in the United States and is known for his liberal views. He loves to poke fun at Biblical literalists and the Ascension is one of his targets.

Have you ever asked yourself why people like Spong have trouble with the Ascension? Why for instance would a Lutheran pastor like the Australian Vince Gerhardy, write these words?

“The whole prescientific concept that Jesus went up into heaven defies modern understandings of the universe. “Up where?”, people ask. “Into outer space, a planet, a star?” The ascension story doesn’t fit into modern day thinking anymore; it’s not mentioned in the Bible very much and it falls on a workday. Who needs it?”

What is the problem Spong and others have with the story of the ascension?

It is the 3-decker universe view held by the ancients. Heaven is above where God dwells. Earth is in the middle where we live, and hell is below. That is the pre-scientific view.

Spong says: “Carl Sagan was a friend of mine. He was a sort of atheist by profession. He thought that anyone who believed must be sort of silly. Sagan said to Spong “ Jack, have you ever thought about what the ascension would look like to an astrophysicist? Do you know that if Jesus literally ascended into the sky travelling at the speed of Light 180,000 miles per second that he still hasn’t yet escaped our galaxy and our galaxy is one of billions and billions of galaxies?”

The challenge is this. The Bible is prescientific. How could it not be? Does that mean because the 3- decker universe was an assumption for the Biblical writers, that we can go ahead and dismiss anything that is referring to heaven, something like the Ascension?

St Augustine thought the Ascension was fundamental to faith. It is in all the creeds. It is in St. Luke’s writings and those of St. Paul. It is in Mark’s Gospel, the first one written.

If we dismiss the Ascension because we dismiss the 3-decker universe have we lost heaven? Where do our loved go who have died? If the resurrection is true where did Jesus go after the resurrection?

What about the resurrection appearances in rooms with locked doors and disappearances after eating? Where did the food go after Jesus ate it and he disappeared? What about angels that appear like the one who led St. Peter out of prison? Where do they go afterwards? What about the Baptism by the Holy Spirit when the heavens open and a voice is heard?

What about St. Paul's encounter on the road to Damascus with a light brighter than the sun and a voice is heard: "Saul. Saul why persecutest thou me?"

What about when Stephen is stoned to death and he has a vision of Jesus at the right hand of God, not seated as the Ascension has him, but standing paying deep attention. Where is Jesus when he is doing this?

Of course, the ancients had a name for this. They called it Heaven. Did they think it was just above the sky? Probably, but the real point is this: for them it was **somewhere**. They were not making it up. It was very real for them.

For instance, St. Paul cited this encounter on the Road to Damascus, to the Roman state on a trial for his life, as a real experience that changed his life. After all, when Stephen was stoned, Paul was complicit. But then after he had after the Damascus Road experience, he had a complete about face. Instead of persecuting Christians he became one. Why? If nothing had happened on the Damascus Road? He was sure he heard a voice that changed his life. He fell, down struck from his horse, by a light greater than the sun. **Something was happening from Somewhere**. Something so great that St. Paul's life and world view was instantly changed.

I have often thought that we moderns are arrogant. We think we know better than the ancients. But do we?

There are groups of scientists today who are trying a new form of inquiry: to investigate the invisible world. We believe today that dark matter forms 90% of the universe along with dark energy. And we haven't got a clue why it exists. Very recently, scientists claim to have discovered the existence of the subatomic particle the Higgs boson particle. According to Einstein there is much about the universe that is mysterious and beyond what we will ever fully comprehend despite our best efforts to understand.

For instance, according to one learned friend of mine, there are, according to mathematics, 13 possible dimensions. We can see three dimensions. According to Einstein there are at least 4 dimensions the last one being space-time.

Raymond Moody M.D. Ph.D. investigated over 100 near death experiences and has become convinced, that there is a dimension parallel to ours. Here is what he says: "People who come back from death relate that in their near-death experience they entered into a world that wasn't temporal or spatial, as we are experiencing it. And since we can't describe this event in terms of

time and space, then we can't put it into language- because our language is temporal and spatial so that the most we can do is to resort to metaphors."

(For me the word Heaven is a metaphor to describe a reality)

Dr. Moody says; " I think of death in terms of transition; in the sense of expansion of consciousness; in the sense of entering into love; and of going into a reality that is incomprehensible from our current point of view...I regard death as simply a transition into another kind of reality, one that is more interesting than the reality that we are in, **because I think it includes this one.** I was born in the radio age, and now we are on the verge of 500 channels, full color stereo around the clock with video playback capacity... I think of dying as like going immediately from the radio age to five hundred channels."

Let me conclude with two stories. The first is an 'up' story...spatially perceived as 'up'.

It took place in 1935. A professor and his wife were going for an early morning walk in the woods in Maine. As they walked along, they heard voices behind them, and the professor remarked that 'we have company in the woods this morning'. Soon the voices caught them up and the professor and his wife expected the voices to pass them by, beside them. But the voices got ahead of them and the professor and his wife suddenly saw 3 persons but walking above them. The professor and his wife watched them disappear as if they were walking along a road above them into the woods.

The professor said to his wife. "Let's sit down and each of us write down what we have just seen without talking to one another about it." So, they sat down and wrote down what they had seen. They compared the notes. They had seen the same thing: Three young women dressed in white flowing robes, talking to one another as they took in the beauty of the day. They were walking along, above the heads of the professor and his wife and disappeared into the woods and were gone as mysteriously as they had arrived.

I note this: These young ladies were up, not in the sky but above the professor and his wife. They were in their own world and didn't seem conscious of the professor and his wife. But the veil between worlds was thin. Their voices could be heard, their laughter, and they could be seen.

Where were they?

A second story.

My father was aware that I was in theology at Knox College. He died before I graduated. I took the charge of Knox Stratford. The front of the church had a lectern and a pulpit one either side. Where the lectern was there were two chairs. I would sit in one and the other was usually empty.

One day a psychic who I knew came to the church for the service. At the end of the service she said "There is someone sitting beside you at the front. He looks really happy when you start to preach." Now I knew there was no one there that day. The chair was empty.

I thought to myself this woman is really crazy. But then I went home and thought about it. I knew that my father always wanted to hear me preach. Was he perhaps there somehow?

I thought, I will put this to the test. So, I got a whole bunch of photos together. One included my father and I set them out on a table. (I want you to know I do not look even a little bit like my father so there was no clue there) I then brought the psychic up stairs to the library where I always wrote my sermons and sat her down and asked her if the person she had seen was among the photos?

She looked and immediately put her hand on the only photo of my dad.

I swallowed hard and offered her a coffee and we talked awhile.

About a year later she once again came into the church. After the service she said “He is not there anymore. Did something happen?”

“I said my mother has died since you were here last.”

“Oh” she said “That’s it. He is with her!”

And with that she turned and walked out of the church with the problem solved as far as she was concerned!

Just because the Ascension is a full-blown mystery to us is no reason to dismiss it. Why not leave it as a mystery?

As Hamlet said: “There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

In the name of our Heavenly Father, Amen.