

Ascension

Well, if resurrection isn't weird enough for people to believe, now, here's ascension. This is all the stuff even some people in the church struggle with – a bodily resurrection...ascension...the second coming of Christ. It's all here.

But the ascension actually has some help for us, in these days when we professing that Christ is still present in the church, even if in radically different ways from the norm.

So let's say a little about what ascension is and isn't, and then talk about some connections for us.

The first thing to say is that like incarnation, the miracles of Jesus, and the resurrection, ascension is mostly mystery. We can't think our way into it and ultimately we can't really explain it.

But let's start here...this was Jesus in the flesh who ascended into heaven, not just Jesus' spirit. Every week we confess that we believe in the resurrection of Christ's body and since his body isn't here now, he has to be in heaven, physically.

This seems weird to us because we are used to thinking of heaven in general as only a place where souls go. But that isn't exactly what the Bible says, here or elsewhere.

We also have an understanding of space in general as a receptacle – a particular place with boundaries.

We talk about public space and private space, living space, outdoor space. But heaven isn't space like that. Instead heaven is another dimension...and it's a dimension very close to us.

Remember, Jesus' primary proclamation of the gospel, was that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

For now, the risen Christ is present within and among us, here on earth, as the Holy spirit. In this present age, he comes to us in an embodied way through the word, the water of baptism, and the bread and wine of communion. He comes to us in the fellowship and love of the Christian community. He comes to us in the faces of the poor, the sick, the hungry, the prisoner.

One day, the work of new creation will be complete. Heaven and earth will be joined and the risen Christ, in the flesh, will dwell with us, in the flesh. Sounds weird, but it's what scripture says.

Because Christ ascended to heaven in the flesh, he is our literal connection to God. He is the person through whom all creation is joined to God the creator in heaven.

The ascended Christ is one with but not the same as the Holy Spirit dwelling in and with us as the church. How that is so is another of those mystery things. But what it means then is that Christ rules over both heaven and earth.

We look around us and say how is it that Christ rules over earth? Just look at everything that's going on. We'd like Christ's rule to be a little more obvious, or even forceful. But Jesus never worked that way when he walked the earth. Instead, Jesus brought healing and transformation to people, one at a time.

The risen Christ doesn't rule with force. But because Christ rules over heaven and earth, he does sometimes stand in judgment of us and of the church. We are convicted when we do not live the lives we are called to as Christ's followers. But at the same time, Christ also intercedes for us and repeatedly raises us out of the graves we dig for ourselves.

Finally, the risen Christ, who rules over heaven and earth still bears the scars of crucifixion. It's the wounded, crucified Christ who reigns.

And that risen Christ judges us when we are drawn to a church of wealth and power rather than to humble, and even sacrificial love, for one another.

I can't explain how all of this is so. I can't even say for sure that I've got it all right. I can't explain how Jesus can physically be in heaven...that's that whole mystery part.

But once I'm able to let go of trying to explain it, I find that I can imagine this scene and just be awed by it.

I'm not sure ascension, or for that matter incarnation or resurrection, were ever really meant to be understood. When I am able to lay aside the need to understand it, what really captures my imagination with the ascension is this sense that heaven and the risen Christ are so near to us.

Celtic spirituality is a type of spirituality introduced to us from the ancient Celtic Christians in Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

One of the Celtic concepts that has captured the imagination of Christians as well as the spectrum of spiritual but not religious folks is the concept of thin places.

In actual Celtic Christianity, it seems thin places are actual places...specific places in the rugged, windswept hills in the land of the Celts...places where the presence of God can be powerfully felt.

In contemporary spirituality, thin places aren't necessarily fixed places. They can happen anywhere and anytime. The place can be a religious or spiritual place that's trying to be a thin place, but it can also be a pretty ordinary place.

Back in the early 2000's, I was discerning the call to leave medicine and become a pastor. Although I had a strong sense of God's presence throughout the process, it was mostly more of a murky sense of guidance than a real thin place.

But once, on my way back from an appointment in Omaha with my spiritual director, I stopped at the Holy Family Shrine in Gretna. The Holy Family Shrine was obviously built to be a place to feel God's presence. I don't know if its builders would have used the term thin place, but it's a pretty good candidate for one.

I've been there multiple times before and after this particular visit, and although it's always lovely, I've only really experienced it is what I would call a true thin space that one time.

Again, I can't explain or really even articulate the sense...but I was overcome with awe that God would come so close...so close, to me...so close that heaven and earth were almost one.

I believe that sense of closeness is the power of the ascension.

Other ways of spiritual connection also get some of their power from the nearness of the Risen Christ. The Orthodox church has their icons and the massive screens at the front of their sanctuaries.

They are constructed to be windows to God. That's the power of ascension and the nearness of the Risen Christ.

But the nearness of the risen Christ is also often in other not so religious places.

Maybe you've had an experience of a thin place in the natural world...or at the bedside of a dying loved one...or in the caring face of a good friend.

Maybe you've experienced a thin place gazing at a particular work of art or listening to a piece of music.

The arts have a way of moving past our constantly processing brains to a place beyond...the place where thin places can actually work.

Maybe you've experienced a thin place in a particular worship service – always a pastor's hope.

In this digital world, we are learning to trust that somehow the risen Christ is near in Zoom and livestreamed worship.

And of course, a most important place to experience the nearness of the risen Christ is prayer. When we pray, there is this profound connection between the Holy Spirit praying within us and the risen Christ who is so close to us, ready to intercede for us and for the world.

We in the church are of course called to care for others, to love our neighbors, to give of ourselves.

But perhaps our strongest call right now is to pray...to pray for the world, to pray for our leaders, to pray for medical people and scientists, to pray for those most impacted by the pandemic.

And we're called to trust...to trust that the presence of the Holy Spirit within us and the Risen Christ near to us...is a power that can heal this world.