**Sunday 21st May 2023 Easter 7**

**Luke 24: 44-53**

**The Day of Ascension (May 18th)**

**Rev David Coster**

I am not sure whether you realise it or not – so let me tell you – this Sunday marks the end of the Easter Season (we are forty days from Easter) when we have focused so much on the crucifixion, resurrection and what these events may mean for us in our life and faith. The Easter season, in the Christian faith, is a time when we focus on the new governance that breaks the grip of all that is old, tired, deathly and enslaving. This theme has been picked up in the sermons of the past number of weeks.

The Son of God, who was crucified and left for dead in a tomb, has somehow risen from the dead (resurrection not resuscitation) and has moved among his disciples, in what to us seems mind boggling ways.

Immediately after Jesus’ death, the community of his followers scattered, disillusioned and afraid. Their dreams for a new Kingdom under God were totally shattered. They were uncertain what the future held. Had their three years of following Jesus just been a waste of time – duped by a charismatic leader?

But as the risen Lord began to make his presence known in their midst they began to gather as a tight-knit community sharing and praying together. By the time of our reading today, relating the account of the ascension, the followers of Jesus have become a new community held together by prayer and a common purpose. In the forty days since his resurrection Christ has continued to teach and mentor his disciples. During that time the disciples’ sense of dislocation (caused by confusion and grief) has lifted and their shattered sense of purpose has been renewed. The resurrected presence of Christ in their midst changes them.

The compassionate Christ helps them in the forty days he is with them to see that his death does not signal the end but rather the beginning of a new mission and responsibility.

The time comes for Jesus to leave the disciples. He has faith and trust in them to carry on the work he has begun. They may not have the physical Jesus with them but they have each other.

Jesus blesses his disciples, gives them one or two words of advice and then leaves their sight – ascends to heaven. Luke puts it this way, “He then lead them out of the city over to Bethany. Raising his hands he blessed them, and while blessing them, took his leave, carried up into heaven.”

Now we have to be careful how we interpret the words “carried up into heaven.” Not every ancient authority has these words included. Some conclude with the words, While he blessed them, he parted from them.”

Let me try to place this in context for you. Just as Jesus came down to earth in the incarnation – born as a child of Mary, he now “goes up to heaven” in the ascension. And after Jesus goes up to heaven in the ‘ascension’ so the Holy Spirit will ‘come down’ on the believers at Pentecost – which we will celebrate next Sunday.

Now some may find all this coming and going – ascending and descending a little difficult to understand. My suspicion is that Luke and the other biblical writers probably intended for us to understand their usage of “ascending” and “descending” as metaphorical rather than literal.

As Mark and John don’t include the ‘birth narratives’ of Jesus in their Gospels, so Matthew and John don’t include the ascension. Luke does – as do about twenty other references alluding to the ascension of Jesus.

By the end of the second century, Christians confessed the ascension in the Apostles’ Creed: “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

By 384, an exact place on the Mount of Olives was venerated and in 390 a wealthy Roman woman named Poimenia financed the construction of the Chapel of the Ascension.

In *The Big Questions in Science and Religion* (2008) the Oxford Theologian and ordained Anglican Priest Keith Ward captures the clash of the cosmologies we experience with the ascension story when he writes, “We now know that, if Jesus began ascending two thousand years ago, he would not yet have left the Milky Way (unless he attained warp speed.)” When I commented on this to my brother, Ray, he said to me with a laugh, “May be one of the reasons why our Lord has taken so long to return to earth!!!!!

Our understanding of time and space today is different from those of Biblical times. Stephen Davis of Claremont University puts it this way, “I do not believe that in the Ascension Jesus went up, kept going until he achieved escape velocity from the earth, and then kept moving until he got to heaven, as if heaven were located somewhere in space. The Ascension of Jesus was primarily a change of state rather than a change of location. Jesus changed in the Ascension from being present in the realm of space and time to being present in the realm of eternity, in the transcendent heavenly, or eternal realm.”

That comment gels with me. What is been said is simply that Jesus returned to the realm from which he was sent. Enlightenment rationalism and scepticism may struggle with this, but as people of faith in God active in our world then we should rejoice.

To God be the glory. Amen