

# Ascension Day 2020

## Church of the Ascension Stirchley

Acts 1:1-11

Luke 24:44-end

Sun breaks through a hole in the grey cloud, shafts plunging to splash light on the earth stirring inexplicable hope, and the impossibly white clouds through the gap suggest a great beyond. They burst with the blessing of rain and frown with the threat of storm. They hold the secret of rainbows and harbour the voice of thunder. They are ungraspable, and when they envelop you they are disorientate utterly, yet gently kiss your cheek with dampness. No wonder clouds have been a poetic meeting place with God in every age and culture and art.

What John theologised about in his poetic Gospel, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, St Luke dramatizes from the annunciation to this moment of disappearance. We call it ascension because of the irresistible poetic sense of heaven being above. Think how bright cumuli piled high like meringue behind the horizon lift your gaze and, looking up, your posture changes, your hunch uncurls, you find both your smallness and your wonder at being alive come together. The other thing about height is that it gives you a better view, so of course we poetically talk of the heavens “above.” God can see everything from there, so to speak. No-one crafting scripture thought about it too pedantically. They were more interested in the truth of feeling. Literalism is a modern curse.

No wonder a cloud took Jesus from their sight. It works, it has always worked as the poetic boundary between earth and heaven.

It was on a ridge, a Sabbath’s walk from the city centre, in Bethany. That ordinary suburb had been a place of friendship and hospitality for Jesus. Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived there. Luke and John both describe meals there, and the sisters’ differently patterned devotion, Martha with her sharp intellect and eagerness to talk doctrine and ethics; Mary devoted pupil at his feet, ready to become a teacher of faith herself maybe; more passionate perhaps, anointing him in a powerful liturgical gesture, John says. Both were capable of honest anger with him, yet gave him a safe place in the threatening city. Theological conversation, honest friendship, worship and practical hospitality. That’s Bethany. St Luke’s gospel is a series of meals, interspersed with stories and parables about other meals. The one Martha cooked, the one shared at the Passover, the one at Emmaus and the grilled fish he ate just before this closing passage of the Gospel are four of the most moving, glowing with meaning. John’s gospel adds the feast at Martha and Mary’s place celebrating the raising of Lazarus – imagine that evening (Chapter 12). All that intimate fellowship is folded into the unbearable farewell at Bethany. No wonder Jesus went to Bethany one more time before saying goodbye.

But it is a goodbye like no other. In our human anxiety that God may not care for us, in our vague shame about our bodily preoccupations, in our status anxiety as social creatures, we need to witness God among us, in Jesus, proving his compassion, affirming our physicality, inspiring our sociability. But if he stays there too long, so few can meet him, so few can eat with him. They had to let him go. Having shown God among us, this goodbye was to enable him to be with us and available to us all, in all times and all places. If he’d

stayed, there would have to be a queue, longer than any outside Sainsbury's at the moment. By going, he could be with us all. The ascension isn't about Jesus going away to safety in the sky. It's about him coming to be with each of us. It's striking that, as the disciples gaze at the clouds, Luke brings them back to earth with a bump, two heavenly figures in white standing among them in ordinary Bethany. The heaven-earth traffic is two way at Ascension. Christian thought of heaven is no escape. It's about heaven's perspective here and now on ordinary earth.

In our physically fragmented fellowship this year, we give particular thanks for this essential intimacy in the Ascension. For Mary, Martha, the other disciples and indeed his family to let him go must have been painful. Yet Luke's Gospel describes their joyful return to the city. He expands this wonderfully in the sequel which we explore more in the next two weeks. They knew there was something bigger to expect than their own warm feelings about Jesus, however precious. They were gradually discovering that what they had witnessed over the last three years was for the whole world. The Ascension ushered in a new era of worship which is entirely uncompetitive. There is no need to scabble over fragments of Jesus' time or identity as Martha and Mary once did. It's baffling and pathetic that we still find reasons to do so across and within our denominations. But there is no need. All our different idioms and tastes in worship make a rich patchwork, as do the geographical parishes we serve.

But for now, I imagine many in our ordinary neighbourhood are feeling very much alone at the moment, so the most moving thing about Ascension is that as we listen in wistfully to a service from our beloved parish church, assured by Catherine's voice, unable to attend, missing our friends, eating alone, we know Jesus is wholly present and attentive to each one of us. We do not need to compete for him. He is not too busy at the large church in the city centre. We can rejoice he is with them because he is with us. We are not alone. We eat with him. Every meal is shared with him, a kind of Eucharist, with Jesus as both guest and host in your home. That's why I've been encouraging All Saints worshippers sometimes to set their meal table as if for a special occasion. Ascension proclaims there is no competition for Jesus' attention. He is with you, accompanying you through any disorientation and suffering, affirming you in your physical preoccupation, assuring you of your priceless sociability.

We not only give thanks for the intimacy of the Ascension, but also for this Church of the Ascension. Situated on a ridge a modest walk out from the half glamorous, half threatening city centre, in an ordinary suburb, Ascension is both Martha and Mary. It is a place of welcome, where practical soup makers and children's group leaders make safe space for neighbours; where Sunday by Sunday incense evokes the clouds where heaven and earth meet, where as for Mary, liturgical gesture matters, where like her pray-ers patiently listen and discern Jesus' call in a quiet weekday mass. It is a place where for many years the Martha intellect has been taken seriously and the Mary stillness around sacraments his honoured. It is a place where Mary and Martha dwell happily together.

We ache to share properly again. Your priests long to raise the host, refracting all the warmth and sorrow, all the grief and refreshment of this strange time. We long for the reassuring orientation of the shared sacraments. We are waiting, like the women and men In Jerusalem who knew the risen Jesus had to wait for the Spirit's freedom. But as we wait, let the ordinariness of our hospitable ministry in ordinary neighbourhoods be deeply affirmed. It was a place just like this where Jesus chose to say goodbye, in order that we should know him to be with us everywhere.