

The Apostles' Creed: Week 9

...He ascended into Heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty...

In the Scriptures:

1. The Lord says to my lord:

“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”

The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying,

“Rule in the midst of your enemies!”

Your troops will be willing
on your day of battle.

Arrayed in holy splendor,
your young men will come to you
like dew from the morning’s womb.

The Lord has sworn

and will not change his mind:

“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”

(Psalm 110:1-4)

2. Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city.

(Acts 1:6-12)

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3. Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being.

(Hebrews 7:23-8:2)

As described by Christian writers:

4. He did not leave heaven when he came down to us; nor did he withdraw from us when he went up again into heaven. The fact that he was in heaven even while he was on earth is borne out by his own statement: No one has ever ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven.

These words are explained by our oneness with Christ, for he is our head and we are his body. No one ascended into heaven except Christ because we also are Christ: he is the Son of Man by his union with us, and we by our union with him are the sons of God. So the Apostle says: Just as the human body, which has many members, is a unity, because all the different members make one body, so is it also with Christ. He too has many members, but one body.

Out of compassion for us he descended from heaven, and although he ascended alone, we also ascend, because we are in him by grace. Thus, no one but Christ descended and no one but Christ ascended; not because there is no distinction between the head and the body, but because the body as a unity cannot be separated from the head.

- Augustine, "Homily on the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord"

5. Can we then simply drop the Ascension story? The answer is that we can do so only if we regard the Resurrection appearances as those of a ghost or a hallucination. For a phantom can just fade away; but an objective entity must go somewhere – something must happen to it. And if the Risen Body were not objective, then all of us (Christian or not) must invent some explanation for the disappearance of the corpse. And all Christians must explain why God sent or permitted a 'vision' or 'ghost' whose behaviour seems almost exclusively directed to convincing the disciples that it was not a vision or a ghost but a really corporeal being. If it were a vision then it was the most systematically deceptive and lying vision on record. But if it were real, then something happened to it after it ceased to appear. You cannot take away the Ascension without putting something else in its place.

- C.S. Lewis, "Miracles"

6. Yet people have doubted the Ascension. I wonder, have any of those doubted whose lives were marked by imitation? No, but in aimlessness one doubts. Just begin imitation on a small scale, and you will find out that the assurance that he actually has ascended to heaven will indeed come.

-Søren Kierkegaard, "For Self-Examination"

Why we believe in Christ's Ascension:

- The same Apostles who saw Christ after the Resurrection, also saw him depart visibly from Earth. After these miracles, it was reasonable for them to take his word for it that he was leaving them in order to go to a place where he could be with God in a more intimate way. As human beings we cannot visualize what Heaven (which is presumably outside of our own spacetime) is like. But we can believe that the Father, having rescued his Son from death, has now put him in authority over all the powers of darkness which tried to defeat him.
- The Ascension does not mean that Christ became divine again (he always was), nor that he ceased to be human (he will be forever). But it does mean that for the first time, a human being like us was exalted to the presence of the Father, where he has been given full control over the universe, and where he intercedes for us constantly. As members of his Body, we experience Christ's reign through the giving of the Holy Spirit. If Christ had remained a King on Earth, only a few privileged people would be able to interact with him at any time. The rest of us would have to be governed by his ministers and officials! But as a King in Heaven, all of us are constantly in his presence. Through faith we can be with him in a deeper way, by allowing him to transform our hearts to become more like him.