

Sunday, June 1, 2014 (Ascension): Acts 1:1-11

by [Bradley E. Schmeling](#) in the [May 28, 2014](#) issue

A few years ago, I was in charge of worship at a regional gathering of Lutherans. Solely by accident, the opening service was scheduled on the afternoon of Ascension Day. Not one of us on the committee had ever planned a liturgy for this day. Worship on a Thursday, usually at the end of May or near the beginning of June, simply pressed Lutheran piety too far. We might have a devotion at the beginning of a regularly scheduled meeting, but gathering the whole assembly for worship seemed like too much. Only the most pious even suggested it.

One of the committee members vaguely remembered that one old tradition has the Paschal candle, burning at each worship service since the Easter Vigil, extinguished after the reading of the Gospel. This seemed too literal to most of the group—a ritual extinguishing of the presence of Christ among us, nothing left of the light except an unfortunate wisp of smoke curling its way to the ceiling. I imagined everyone at the worship service standing there staring up as the smoke disappeared into the hotel ballroom HVAC system.

In many ways, the Ascension story is simply too literal for our postmodern sensibilities. We know that the space station is circling the globe just above the clouds. We know that people don't literally float up to heaven or down to hell. In addition, the story seems a bit forced, the life story of Jesus wrapped up too neatly, providing a dramatic way to explain Jesus' absence—the church's experience without his historical presence.

Perhaps extinguishing the Paschal candle felt like standing on the mountain, watching Jesus disappear into the clouds and leave his friends behind. Perhaps it felt as if the Easter story were now being extinguished. In Acts, the disciples seem to be standing there with their mouths wide open, unsure of what to make of this experience. It takes two angels to break the silence of the mountaintop: Hey, what are you looking at? He'll be back.

The promise is that he will come again on clouds of glory. But for the livable future, it is clouds of memory that will obscure his presence—along with the shaky

interpretation of those who try to remember what he said and did. The historical Jesus is gone. He's not with us like he was with the disciples. He never will be again.

In some ways, Ascension Day is the first day of Ordinary Time, the time in-between, the time between resurrection and the end of history itself. We confess that Jesus has ascended to the right hand of God. He has gone into the future, where he bends our days toward justice and peace; he goes ahead of us into eternity, where all will one day be gathered. Yet Ascension Day feels like the day after the party, the day after visiting family has packed up and driven away. It's the day to wash the sheets and put away the special dishes. It's the day for the walk back to Jerusalem.

There's melancholy and uncertainty in this ascension. Just behind the great fullness of Easter comes the confusing absence; both experiences are bound together in the life of faith. We love the power and the directness of Easter—lilies and trumpets, appearances behind closed doors—but there's something inside us that knows we can't take it every day. We need space to stare at the cloudy sky, moments to wonder if our experience is really true. We need the long walk back to the house. We need absence as much as presence.

But I'm not sure we always know how to talk about the absence. We assume that our feelings of absence come from doubt. Recently, a confirmand sat in my office and said that he just couldn't feel anything. He wanted to feel Jesus. He wanted to know that Christ was really alive. Instead, he said, "I just sit in church and feel alone."

I wanted to assure him that he wasn't alone, that we were with him, that the ascended and reigning Christ held his future. Yet something about our conversation made me know that it wouldn't be the right answer to jump to the end of Matthew, with its promise of Jesus' presence to the end of the age. All I could muster was, "Sometimes it's like that." I suspect it was an extraordinarily unsatisfying answer.

Maybe the ascension teaches us to trust these moments, these spaces between experiences, as the place where new history is possible. If we can let ourselves be suspended in that moment—maybe even let our mouths fall open for a moment in astounded disbelief—we may find ourselves beginning again, changed and maybe more mature. There are times when Christ has to leave us so that we figure out how to carry light ourselves. We need his absence to discover the power of Easter life within us. There is both loss and power, death and resurrection, in this mysterious

realization that incarnation includes us.

At our regional gathering on that Ascension Day, we decided that we would extinguish the Paschal candle as our committee member suggested. But first, we had a dancer bend and twirl through the space, carrying a collection of smaller candles. One by one, she lit the little candles from the Paschal candle and delivered them to members of the assembly. By the time she bowed to the candle and extinguished its light, tiny flames flickered throughout the room, even as the smoke predictably disappeared into nothing. In that moment, ascension moved from the mountain toward Pentecost, and we were the light of Christ.