

Above and beyond: Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [May 17, 2003](#) issue

Just like that, Jesus is gone. He reappears just long enough to say goodbye. Like a wraith, like a dream, he leaves behind no children, no estate, no writings, no trace of himself except this feeling that his presence was real, that his absence is temporary. Christians have this uncanny feeling that *he was just here. He must have just stepped out.*

It's a feeling of mixed joy and grief, of doubt and near certainty. The ascension marks the moment when we pass from Jesus' time into our own.

The stories say that he is taken up into heaven—like Elijah—and while we puzzle over the physics of how this happened, we have no trouble understanding it emotionally. We know too much about loss. Loved ones are suddenly taken from us, and the manner in which they go fills us with awe. It is an amazing, dreadful thing. Even though we know that they are going to “a better place,” we cannot follow, and have a hard time imagining that we ever will. In the strange days afterward, we have to reconcile feeling bereft with receiving an inheritance.

So the stories about Jesus' ascension are about a Christian attitude toward death. Take away the fantastic circumstances, and here is the hard reality: Jesus is gone. He rose not just from the dead, but right up and out of our world.

Yet we cannot take away the miraculous. Indeed, the miracle is the whole point: this ascension, a second Easter, confirms that he is going to heaven. His Jewish disciples see with their own eyes that he is not going to Sheol, the realm below, but to the abode of God. He is alive, so maybe their loved ones are alive; maybe death is not the end of us. As they stand on the earth, the disciples surely can think of others who were just here and might be back soon for those they love.

Luke tells two stories about the ascension. In the first, he says that Jesus walked with the disciples “as far as Bethany,” where his friends Mary and Martha lived. According to the Gospel of John, Bethany was also where he raised Lazarus from the dead. So it was a significant place for him—a good place for him to spend his last moments on earth.

Let's read between the lines and imagine that he chose the place of his departure because he wanted to see Mary and Martha one last time. Perhaps they ran to meet him, threw their arms round him, shouted in amazement. Mary probably had no more tears to wet his feet. Perhaps he sat at their table and let Martha wait on him again. All the while, the wondering disciples who had traveled the few miles from Jerusalem saw why he had risen, why he had come back here. Read this way, the Gospel version of the ascension is a love story.

Luke's second account of a departure site is in Acts. Here he doesn't mention Bethany, but says that Jesus ordered the disciples "not to leave Jerusalem" for Galilee right away, instructions that are different from those in other Gospels. At any rate, this version recalls the ascension of Elijah, and then surpasses it completely.

As Elijah waited for the whirlwind that would take him to heaven, his disciple Elisha asked for "a double portion of his spirit." Sure enough, when Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle, that's what he got—a powerful dose of the Spirit. In similar fashion, Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them comfortless, but would give them the Spirit. He meant for them to have an inheritance. And when, in a manner of speaking, they picked up his mantle, that's what they got—a double portion. The Spirit at Pentecost! We can still feel the force of it, whistling around our ears.

This, too, is a love story. A story of how love survives loss. We are not comfortless. We don't worry too much about his absence, in part because his Spirit is so alive and present. He may have risen, but in another sense he remains on the ground. He has become his disciples. They have become him.

Carl VandeGiessen, in his horn-rimmed spectacles and red tennis shoes, remains vivid in my mind. Ten years ago he lost his wife, Ruth, after her long battle with Alzheimer's. Carl had sat at her bedside every day, even in the long years when she hadn't known him. "This is what I took my wedding vows for," he would tell me.

They had met in the Epworth League of the old Methodist Church, raised beagles together, traveled together and maintained the romance of their marriage. When she died during Holy Week, it seemed to unnerve his only daughter. I meant to console him when I said, "Carl, I'm sorry. It's especially hard to lose her this time of year."

"Are you kidding?" he said. "This is the best time for my Ruthie. She's with God now. That's what this week is all about."

Now even Carl has gone—walking confidently in his red shoes to a realm I can only imagine.

Even as the ascension leaves us here, in the modern world, ascension points beyond it. We know little about heaven—not even, really, if it is up there—but we have a lot of hope for our loved ones. We expect to see generations and generations of them, somewhere, in a time that is neither ancient nor modern. Before we were even born, Jesus changed the way we think about the dead. I would like to see Carl again someday, but this world is not the place to seek him, because he is not here. He is risen.