

The ascension story can inspire us to be more fully part of the world

**This is not a unblemished body rising to heaven.
This is Jesus in the flesh, God carrying
embodiedness through to the end.**

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May 29, 2019



Detail of the ascension, Folio 13v of the Rabbula Gospels, sixth-century illuminated Syriac book

I've been listening to [a podcast about the Heaven's Gate cult](#), thinking how very strange and warped the group members' beliefs were—they thought aliens from the Hale-Bopp comet were going to pick them up. Then I started looking at the story of the ascension: "While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." The version in Acts, I think, has an even more dramatic flair: "When [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."

The ascension isn't exactly UFOs. But it's not too far off. If we're honest, it's a weird story. I mean, sure, Jesus performs miracles throughout the Gospels, but they're mostly functional: some water into wine to keep the party going; multiplying loaves and fishes to feed the crowd; healing people's bodies and spirits. This miracle . . . well, this is just showing off.

Honestly, it is an awkward story. It feels a little bit like talking about UFOs. The members of Heaven's Gate were, in some way, trying to accomplish what Jesus accomplished in the ascension. People ascending to be with God in another, heavenly realm.

There's a similar atmosphere of the absurd to these two situations and a similar end goal in mind. But there is also a critical difference: the Heaven's Gate community members believed that they had to disable their human "vehicles;" they had to kill their human bodies in order to participate in the "Next Level." Whereas, with Jesus' ascension, Jesus ascends in his entirety. His living human body is somehow part of this glorious, divine, raising up.

Not long before the ascension, Jesus shows his disciples his hands and feet—parts of his body that still bear the wounds from his crucifixion. This is not a perfect, perfected, unblemished body that is rising to heaven. This is Jesus in the flesh that has been broken and the blood that has been poured out. He has the nail wounds in his hands and his feet. His back bears the whip marks from his beating. And then he eats a piece of broiled fish. And *all* of that—the wounded hands, the marked back, the digesting fish—it all gets taken up to sit at the right hand of God.

Jesus does not abandon his "vehicle." He takes it with him. Which is really, when you think of it, rather astounding.

God is incarnate—is enfleshed—in the person of Jesus—and not just in a nominal, superficial way. God carries this embodiedness through to the very end. When Jesus shows his body—his hands, his feet, his wounds—that physicality is somehow comforting to the distressed and confused disciples.

That's how it is, sometimes. The things that comfort us aren't necessarily grand or even traditionally beautiful, but just the things that ground us back in this world. In our humanity. In our bodies. With each other. Like singing a song. Like eating a meal. Like being in the same physical space as people you love, as people who love you. Jesus gives this simple comfort of physicality, of presence.

Unlike the ascension story created by the Heaven's Gate members, *this* ascension story should not inspire us to leave this world, but to be more fully a part of it. It should not lead us into despair for worldly failures, but toward hope in the ways the Divine is part of our earthly existence.

Jesus' ascension story affirms us in our humanity while also affirming God's presence and power in the midst of it all.

Originally posted at [Spacious Faith](#)