
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Ascension

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

I laughed out loud when I read your letter about the prankster in your youth group who celebrated the Feast of the Ascension by putting a rocket inside of a plastic figure of Jesus and sending it soaring into the sky. The Feast of the Ascension often passes without notice, since it falls on the Thursday between the Sixth and Seventh Sundays of Easter.

The prank does point out, though, the struggle we often experience with the claim by the Apostles Creed that Jesus “ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of the Father.”

It sounds like a story stuck in a pre-scientific view of things. Once you stop believing that heaven is a place above the clouds, you assume that you can stop thinking seriously about the Ascension.

The Ascension, though, is more about what’s happening here on earth than what might be happening in the heavens.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that Christ “ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things” (Ephesians 4:10).

Brian Taylor, an Episcopal priest, describes the movement of the Ascension as being like the evaporation stage of the water cycle. Water is taken up out of the earth in order to be gathered in the clouds and then returned to the earth in the more diffused form of rain.

Brian also notes that it’s an illusion to think that we are independent beings, separate from each other. We are more like processes than things and our lives are interconnected and interpenetrating, as if we are all part of one living organism of creation.

Scientists are reaching the same conclusions in areas as diverse as quantum physics and epigenetics. They have determined, for example, that they are changing the nature of some systems just by observing them. Some are now suggesting that individual cells in our bodies acquire different identities based on what we actually need at a given time.

All of this has profound implications for our faith. We have always known that our identity is a function of what we pay attention to other than ourselves. But, now we know that our lives are not even really our own.

We belong to each other, which is why, I suspect, Jesus’ last words to his disciples were to go out and proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations. (Luke 24:47)

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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