

The Rev. Paul Lillie,
Rector, St. Mark's Church, Honolulu

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Ever since I was a child, I have been fascinated with the Feast of the Ascension. Maybe it is all those great hymns associated with the day such as “Crown him with many crowns” and “Hail the day that sees him rise, alleluia.” Everyone I know loves those two particular hymns. But I also believe my love of the Ascension was about something deeper for me, even as a child.

I was fortunate to grow up in a church with a large Sunday School program. Our church had an educational wing, and in that building there was a classroom for every grade level. On any given Sunday each classroom would be filled with 15 to 20 children attending Sunday School. Looking back, I now know that I owe much of my faith development to that graded Sunday School. That Sunday School was a gift that taught me love for Jesus Christ.

As a child I remember thinking how great the Ascension was, because it was proof that Jesus ultimately wins. Of course, there is Good Friday and Easter, and those were great days too, but the Ascension was the final chapter for me. It was proof that Jesus rose from the dead, and now he is King of the Universe. The whole world was now in good hands.

Fast-forwarding to several decades later as a priest, my excitement for our Lord's ascension has not waned, but I have also realized people's indifference to the event. When I was serving as a priest at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Buffalo, New York, we celebrated the Ascension every year on the fortieth day after Easter, which is always a Thursday. Of course, this always presents a challenge as people have to make a special effort to come and worship. But the larger challenge that I discovered with this feast was that many of my clergy colleagues were simply not interested in the Ascension. One priest in particular stated, “none of us believe in the resurrection, so we certainly are not going to believe in the ascension.” Yet I discovered

among the laity a curiosity in what the Ascension teaches. What does it mean that Jesus ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father?

That is when I realized that as people of faith, whether children or adults, we long for Jesus to win. Of course, we know this is true from the resurrection, but we also know that the world is not yet a perfect place. More than ever we are suffering from division, dysfunction, and the grip of sin. Our politics are toxic, we are ravaging the environment, and the last century has been the bloodiest century in human history. We like to think we are a people progressing towards perfection, but the actions on the ground contradict our wishful thinking. We still need a Savior. More than ever we need the saving goodness of Jesus Christ.

For me, when I see how the world struggles with so much pain, I have to declare the hope that Jesus rose from the dead, that Jesus has ascended to God Almighty, and that ultimately the world belongs to our Savior who is ruling the cosmos in the highest heavens. Otherwise, life becomes a story of doom and gloom.

So regardless of what the world may be doing, on the fortieth day after Easter, all of us need to be in church proclaiming this alternate reality that belongs to our Savior Jesus Christ. Amidst the pain and grief, we need to stay committed to singing “Christ wins.” We need to shout, “Hail the day that sees him rise, alleluia!” We need to pray, “Lord, enthroned in heavenly splendor, first begotten from the dead, thou alone, our strong defender, lifted up thy people’s head, alleluia!”

I fully understand that at times the Ascension can seem a bit silly, at worst prone to images of a spaceship or Jesus straddling a rocket. For children these can be cool images - for adults they are less helpful. But if we believe in God, we also know that there is another

existence beyond this world. Whatever that might be and whatever it might look like, that is where sin's reign has been vanquished, and where Jesus reigns supreme at God's right hand.

Even better, that alternate kingdom is making its way into our present reality. The Ascension teaches us that God is still committed to our present life, and Jesus is actively living among us to continue the work that began at Good Friday. Just as Jesus reigned from the cross on Good Friday, he now reigns from above, blessing us with those wounded hands, reaching for everything with his embrace of love. Christ has taken the wounds of Good Friday and made them triumphant. That is good news for our wounds as well, for everything that we are, all our pains and our joys, are being embraced by our God. Jesus Christ absolutely does rule over everything, and eventually everything will submit to his love. Nothing and no one will be able to resist God's powerful love and all-sufficient grace. That is good news for our wounds, and it is also good news for those who do not know Jesus Christ.

When the Ascension comes again forty days after Easter, let's not push the day aside in embarrassment or indifference. Take your stand and protest the brokenness of our world. Proclaim the alternate reality that Jesus is King, ruling over the cosmos, and that eventually this King shall bring everything into the perfection of God's love. Hail the day that sees him rise, alleluia! And hail the day also, when the entire cosmos reaches its perfection in God's eternal love.

Questions:

1. What is your favorite Ascension hymn in the Hymnal 1982? Is it because of the tune? If it is because of the tune, how might you pay better attention to the text?
2. Sometimes we make parallels between the Jesus reigning from the cross and Jesus reigning in heaven. What is unique about Jesus reigning from the cross? What is unique about Jesus reigning from heaven? How are these the same?
3. Do you have a story about how your theology as an adult is shaped by your formation in the faith as a child?
4. How might we understand the Ascension of Jesus as an alternate reality? How is such a conversation related to how we understand heaven? How is it related to how we view the cross of Calvary and the resurrection?
5. Why does the Ascension make a difference for people pastorally? What does the Ascension of Jesus have to say in regard to human suffering? What about human joy?
6. Some churches with bell towers have their Ascension Day services in the top of the tower, or in some other convenient high place. What would an Ascension Day service look like in Hawai'i if people were to gather at a high place? Koko Head Hike and Mass? St. Andrew's Bell Tower? Sunrise Eucharist on a hill with picnic breakfast afterwards?
7. Do you believe in the Ascension of Jesus? Why?