Ascension

St. Mary’s in Riverside, 2021

During the church year we celebrate a series

 of what are called “the feasts of the Lord.”

 Many of these feasts are relatively easy to comprehend

 For they often recall some pivotal event in the life of Christ

 Such as his birth

 his presentation in the temple

 or his baptism.

Some of these feasts, however

Are not as readily understood

Such as the feast of the Transfiguration

Or the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross

Similarly, I would suggest that today’s feast of the Ascension

 May be a little more difficult to understand

 Than feasts of his birth or his baptism.

Part of the challenge in cracking this feast

 Might be due to that fact that Jesus’ Ascension

 Is not reported in all of the gospels:

 *It is not in the gospel of John*

 *And it is not in the gospel of Matthew*

It does occur in the gospel we read today from Mark

 But virtually all biblical scholars would content

That this 16th chapter was not original to Mark

And was added in the 2nd century

 While Mark was originally written in the first century

It actually occurs twice in the writings of Luke:

 in Luke’s gospel

 And the Acts of the Apostles – our first reading today;

 But these two tellings have different timelines.

 In the gospel of Luke the Ascension seems to occur

 on the day of Jesus’ resurrection

 But in Acts it takes place 40 days after that event

 Which would place it on a Thursday.

Thus, as some of us remember

 We used to celebrate “Ascension” Thursday

 Which was a holy day of obligation

 And should have taken place 3 days ago.

So what is to be believed in this gospel puzzle

 And what do we make of a feast

 That seems to suggest that Jesus’ body

 Is floating somewhere out there in outer space?

 I mean, we’ve sent astronauts up there

 And they haven’t found it

 The international space station hasn’t bumped into it

 And the Hubble telescope

 For all the brilliant pictures it has sent back from space

 hasn’t photographed it either.

Because of the mixed biblical evidence

And the challenging nature of an ascending body

Some preachers actually choose to ignore the feast.

Long ago a now forgotten blogger irreverently wrote:

Ascension is a mystery to me. The whole idea of Jesus ascending through the air into heaven is hard for someone who has seen the [pictures of earth](http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/ap951225.html) from space taken by the Astronauts. Instead I think of Glenda in the movie [The Wizard of Oz](http://thewizardofoz.warnerbros.com/cmp/photo.htm), rising up into the air in her bubble with all the Munchkins waving and shouting "Goodbye, Goodbye" in their little squeaky voices.

She was not alone; another, reflecting on our first reading, wrote:

It’s like a bad B-movie … the camera cuts to an overhead shot of the apostles - dazed, mouths agape, like Gomer Pyle looking up at a skyscraper for the first time. Shazam, he's gone; they all stood there looking up as if at Cape Canaveral for an Apollo space shot. We can almost hear them all say. "Our leader is gone. Now what?"[[1]](#endnote-1)

That comment reminds me of a now defunct ritual

 That Catholics used to enact on this feast.

 Some may remember that after the reading of the gospel

 An acolyte would snuff out the paschal candle

 A symbolic confirmation that Jesus was now gone from the earth.

 When I was a kid, that ritual always left me wondering

 “so now what, since Jesus has left the planet?”

 As an aging adult my theology questions are similar:

 So what does this feast say about our relationship to God?

 And how does it move us forward on our spiritual journey?

 In years past I have answered that question

 By suggesting that Jesus needed to leave

 So that the disciples could take up the mission

 In building God’s reign,

 But I have often wondered if there was something more.

Like millions of others around the world

 For the past few weeks I have been following the story

 Of the Mars Helicopter, Ingenuity[[2]](#endnote-2)

 The first powered and controlled flight on another world.

 As you probably know,

 Ingenuity hitched a ride to Mars on the Perseverance rover

 And arrived on the red planet on February 18th.

 One the rover reached a suitable launch location

 It released Ingenuity to the surface

 To begin a series of test flights.

 Its first flight was April 19th

 Climbing to about 10 feet, hovering a bit

 Completing a turn

 And then landing

 More recently it completed its 5th successful flight

 Climbing over 30 feet

 Flying over 400 feet

 And coming to rest on a new landing site.

 These successes came in the face of incredible challenge

 As Ingenuity had to overcome dangerously thin air

 Less than 1% of the earth’s atmosphere

 Extreme cold

 Plummeting to minus 100 degrees F at night

 And flawed flight software

 That required both a fix and reinstalment:

 A 194-million-mile service call!

Besides being fascinated, even awed by the science here

 I have been thinking about Ingenuity

 While trying to imagine the significance of today’s feast

 For myself, this congregation

 And a global community

 Struggling with pandemics and violence

 Poverty and oppression.

 The juxtaposition of Ingenuity and Ascension

 Made me wonder whether Jesus was the original manifestation

 Of the ingenuity of God

 In which Jesus was delivered to earth

 Not by a rover named perseverance

 But through the cooperation of a young woman

 Whose perseverance through suffering and loss

 Into her own final glory

 Is the wonder we call the Blessed Virgin.

 Jesus as the ingenuity of God

 Faced his own multiple obstacles

 The sometimes-thin atmosphere

 Of human goodness

 The plummeting temperature

 Of human tolerance

 The flawed software of humanity

 Damaged by original sin.

 And so God initiated a holy reboot

 This time from the edges of eternity

 Intended to enable humanity to fly, to soar,

 To overcome the obstacles

 That prevent us from ascending

 To the full height of our dignity and blessedness.

 That holy reboot was the ingenuity of the Only Begotten

 Who took on all of those obstacles

 Who assumed our flawed nature

 And taught us that even in the thin air

 Of our greed and pettiness and insecurities

 We could rise together as a community of the holy.

 He showed us that his rejection,

 His suffering

 His scars did not ground him

 But actually gave him lift …

 Ascending with a body marked by crucifixion

 Anticipating our own ascent

 Through suffering, even death

 In our journey to holiness.

One of the tasks of NASA’s Ingenuity

 Is to serve as a robotic scout

 Surveying the Martian terrain from above

 Eventually enabling astronauts to explore Mars

 By alerting them to dangerous obstacles

 And safe routes for their explorations.

 That mission helps me reimagine

 The importance of today’s feast

 As both a support and encouragement

 For our individual and collective development

 As God’s holy people.

 It is common to imagine the feast of the Ascension

 With befuddled disciples gaping heavenward

 As apparently directionless

 Awaiting the descent of God’s Spirit

 So they can figure out their new earthly mission.

 However, another way to envision this feast

 Is to imagine Jesus going on ahead of us

 Not leaving us behind

 But drawing us forward

 Not abandoning us to find our own way

 But following him into an eternal way.

 Though obviously a sophisticated piece of engineering

 I love the fact that NASA’s Ingenuity

 Is designed with open-source software[[3]](#endnote-3)

 That required the partnership of something like

 12,000 collaborators

 To get Ingenuity off the ground.

 This was not the secretive plan of a handful of geniuses

 But the collective work of a global community

 Of engineers and scientists

 Who together helped Ingenuity achieve lift-off.

 The Christian community is its own form

 Of open-source software

 An open-source kind of spirituality

 That is constructed through the collective partnership

 Of believers and collaborators

 Not only throughout the world

 But throughout human history.

 Jesus, like the cosmos itself,

 Is moving out ahead of us

 Coaching us and coaxing us

 To ascend – to achieve what Eastern Christians call

 Deification

 The English priest and poet Malcolm Guite

 Captures something of this rising into the thin air of eternity

 Something of this journey of deification

 Anticipatedin Jesus’ own Ascension, as he writes:

We saw his light break through the cloud of glory
Whilst we were rooted still in time and place
As earth became a part of Heaven’s story
And heaven opened to his human face.
We saw him go and yet we were not parted
He took us with him to the heart of things
The heart that broke for all the broken-hearted
Is whole and Heaven-centred now, and sings,
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,
Whilst we ourselves become his clouds of witness
And sing the waning darkness into light,
His light in us, and ours in him concealed,
Which all creation waits to see revealed .[[4]](#endnote-4)

May this cosmic feast awake in us

 Our own baptismal ingenuity

 As we are transformed into

 A dynamic cloud of witnesses

 Finding strength in our own weakness

 Singing the darkness around us into light

 As we are taken up with him in the very heart of things

 Through Christ our Lord.

1. <https://www.theursulines.org/2013/05/12/what-are-we-going-to-do/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://mars.nasa.gov/technology/helicopter/#Overview> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://opensistemas.com/en/ingenuity-flies-on-mars-thanks-to-open-source-software/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2012/05/15/a-sonnet-for-ascension-day/> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)