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)