

## Ascended Into Heaven<sup>1</sup>

Last week brought to me a continuation of a sense of future shock or change numbness that I've had for a year or so. Do you remember that term, "future shock?" It means too much change in too short a period to absorb. So, with lots of change people go around a bit dazed and feeling unanchored. Last week we lost Michael Jackson and Farrah Fawcett. Now, I wasn't as big a fan of either of these celebrities as are many people. But still, they were a part of the culture that one just expects to be there. And they're gone.

My mother's death has changed my world considerably. General Motors, where my dad spent the whole of his career, is not gone, but different. I'm sensing big shifts in Christianity in America. Not all bad developments, but significant change. I talked with a newspaper person last week. She said there were big changes in the newspaper business. She added that she was glad she was retiring in a few years. I wonder how many people are counting the months or weeks to retirement because the changes in their particular workplace are so disconcerting.

Thank God that you and I can say that in spite of the upheaval around us it is no less than Jesus Christ who reigns in glory over all that is and that will never change. And the world will never cease to be preserved and perfected and loved!

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on June 28, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

Oh, bad things will happen, but God's love will always reign and will someday prevail over all. And that never changes.

This is the great truth held in the fact that Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection.

And the more you think about the ascension—just as it is presented in the Bible—the more wonderful it becomes. Our lesson for example tells us that. As the disciples were looking on he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. Now, some people get stuck on the mechanics of Jesus in bodily form disappearing into a cloud. They say that the Ascension is much too contrived or phony feeling. Maybe this is because it's difficult—say, on a stage—to depict people flying or floating without awkwardly visible wires spoiling the effect. But if we can get beyond the plainness of the image of Jesus floating up and ponder that a human being with a body entered into the presence of the Father and remains with the Father, we can glimpse at a glorious fact. One of us is up there at the Father's right hand, in an awesome position of authority.

I remember during the presidential election that the people of Kenya were glued to their radios and television sets. This was because they were energized by the thought that the son of a Kenyon---now our president—might rise to become leader of the free world.

The bodily ascension of Jesus Christ means that one of us—a human being—is part of the Trinity. We are mistaken when we think that God changed and became a human in order to come to earth and then switched back to becoming “spiritual” or at least not human in order to return to heaven. There is no switching of his nature with God the Son. The second person of the Trinity is a human. Just as it is awesome to think that God came down, it is awesome to think that a human went up.

Someone says, hold on Doug, that couldn't be right. Jesus Christ is present with us spiritually in the Holy Spirit. If that's your thought, I agree with you. Jesus Christ is also present in the sacraments. Jesus is present in some sense in the Word of God. Jesus Christ is present in some sense in the Bible—the Word of God. And...and this is the point...Jesus lives on and is absent from us as a human being ascended into heaven.

Now, if I'm correct about this, then you and I can take a great deal of encouragement that the one who took children on his lap, and told us about the Father's love towards the prodigal, and who died for our sins, is the one who has the final authority. We have a bunch of clerics terrorizing common people in Iran. They are kicking down doors and shooting people. And, you know what? They don't rule the world. They've grabbed control of a piece of it, for a time. And one

day they and all like them will be swept away in an ocean of divine love.

My favorite line in Richard Attenborough's epic movie, "Gandhi" is this remark from Gandhi himself:

When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they seem invincible. But in the end they always fail. Think of it—always...When you are in doubt that that is God's way, the way the world is meant to be, think of that.

What we can say today is that the way of truth and love is not only God's way, it is God's very being, for Jesus Christ sits on the Father's right hand.

There's more. Jesus' Ascension maps a course that you and I hope to follow. This is where Christian faith is—as we say—mind boggling. When we really face up to the fact that God became a human in Christ (Jesus was fully human, fully divine) then we need to face up to the implication that what he did is within the realm of possibility for any human to do. So when we look at the resurrection of Jesus, we would be wise to conclude, "So that's what God can do for us also after we die." Now we're learning something about heaven. We're learning that our self is preserved. We're not drops returning to the ocean. We're not the breeze and sunshine. In raising Jesus into heaven, we would be wise to conclude, thank God, it can be done.

Basically, when I think of eternal life, I like the idea that I will be Doug; I'll be a human being; and I'll be with the Father. The resurrection of Jesus Christ combined with the ascension, gives me hope that that can happen. There's at least one person in heaven and if I know that person, I may be another one with him.

A final thought. Jesus' bodily ascension makes sense out of the idea that he will come again. Now, I'm not going to spend a lot of time on the second coming of Christ. But the prospect that Jesus will return and will be the central figure in God's renovation of the whole world. Put bluntly, the authority that the risen and ascended Jesus possesses at the Father's right hand will one day be fully and decisively exercised.

The next time I feel disoriented by all the change around, I'll remember that the ultimate authority of this world holds history in the palm of his hand. The next time I find myself shaking my head and wondering "where's this all going?" I'll have an answer. The next time I'm tempted to simply dismiss or destroy a relationship, I'll remember that one day all will be set right and restored. I'll remember that there comes a great reunion of the human family. And the next time I wonder whether this life, my life, is all there is, then I'll remember the one

sitting at the Father's right hand. Now, that's what I call  
good news about the hereafter!