

St Mary's Concord

A Reflection for the Ascension of the Lord (Seventh Sunday of Easter)

In the Australian Church calendar The Ascension of the Lord is moved from Thursday of the sixth week of Easter (forty days after Easter) to the following Sunday and therefore replaces the Seventh Sunday of Easter.

The readings for the Ascension (Year A): Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20. Luke begins his second volume, The Acts of the Apostles, with Jesus ascending into heaven. Matthew concludes his Gospel with Jesus telling the eleven, "I am with you always".

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic only ten people are currently allowed in a church. Sunday Masses have therefore not resumed at St Mary's Concord.

In the 1960s British theoretical physicist Peter Higgs was one of a group of physicists who were working in the field of particle physics. In 1964 they proposed the existence of a subatomic particle that was later called the Higgs boson. It was presented as a theory because no one had been able to show that this particle of matter existed.

It was not until 2012 that the existence of the Higgs boson was demonstrated in an experiment performed at the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland. That experiment led to Peter Higgs and Belgian physicist François Englert being awarded the 2013 Nobel Prize in Physics.

Twenty years earlier in 1993 another Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Leon M. Lederman and science writer Dick Teresi, wanted to help non-scientists to understand the importance of the Higgs boson to what is called the Standard Model of Particle Physics. An enterprising publisher gave their book the title, *The God Particle: If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question?*

What is the question? As we continue to explore the Universe, we do not have to be physicists to understand that we are discovering more questions than answers.


The very earliest records of human history tell us that men and women have always been fascinated by the movement of the sun, the moon, and the planets. Every civilization had its own explanations, its myths, that attempted to answer the question, "Why is it so?"

It is not surprising therefore that they looked up at the stars and believed that the heavens were the home of the gods. And so, we should not be surprised that Luke used the image of Jesus being lifted up among the clouds as the disciples gazed towards heaven.

The Scottish Presbyterian scripture scholar William Barclay said of the Ascension, "It must always be a mystery, for it attempts to put into words what is beyond words, and to describe what is beyond description."

For Luke, the Ascension is a symbolic way to explain why we no longer encounter the Risen Jesus as a physical presence. When he says, for example, that after his resurrection Jesus appeared to the disciples for forty days, he was drawing from a rich biblical tradition.

Our Easter season reflects Luke's timeline. We celebrate the Ascension forty days after Easter and that sometimes leads people to see Acts as a literal account of what happened. But to understand Luke's essential message we need to explore his other biblical symbols.



In Luke's Gospel, when Jesus asked his disciples "Who do the crowds say that I am?" they answered, "some say John the Baptist, others Elijah or one of the ancient prophets come back to life" (Lk 9:18-19). And it was Peter who spoke up and declared that Jesus was the Christ of God.

In his account of the Ascension, Luke draws on the story of Elijah being taken up into heaven (2 Kings 2:1-12). As Elijah is about to be taken up, his disciple, the prophet Elisha, asks, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit". Elijah replies "if you see me as I am taken up from you, it will be granted you."

The disciples of Jesus, like Elisha, witness Jesus being taken up into heaven and they are told to return to Jerusalem where they will receive the gift of his Spirit.

By contrast, Matthew's Gospel concludes not with an account of the Ascension but with Jesus sending the disciples out of their mission and he says to them "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Mt 28:20). Both scenes are about how the disciples share in the mission of Jesus through the gift of his Spirit.

If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question? may be a catchy title for a book that seeks to explain the origins of the Universe but perhaps Luke offers us another insight. As we ponder the meaning of the Ascension, we are drawn into a reality that is beyond human understanding. It can only be seen with the eyes of faith.

No scientific theory or experiment can prove the existence of God. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that enables us to believe that God is with us and so the final week of our Easter journey leads us to Pentecost,

Paul Crowley
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