

Most of us are Newtonian physics people, whether you know it or not. As in Sir Isaac Newton, a polymath from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. We're people who see the world primarily as cause and effect. So, take Newton's third law of motion. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. So, if you throw a basketball while you're on roller skates, as you push the ball forward, the ball will push you backwards. The backwards kick of a gun fired is another example. Walking and running depend on it.

Or the law of inertia which says that objects at rest tend to stay at rest and objects in motion stay in motion unless a force acts on them.

Gravity says if you let go of an object it will fall to the ground.

Newtonian physics is logical and predictable. And for most things in our everyday lives, it works.

Physics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century turned all that upside down. We learned about subatomic particles whose behavior seemed very strange. We learned that time can be relative and not the fixed property we count on in most of our everyday life.

We learned that light is both particle and wave – something Newtonian physics would say is impossible. We learned about entanglement where the action of one particle would affect a particle far away even though there was no visible connection. And then there's the whole Schrödinger's cat thing which has spawned funny social media memes that very few people probably actually understand.

We have Newtonian brains. The ascension is quantum and relativity. It's not something that allows for a very logical conversation.

The only places in scripture that describe the ascension are in the gospel of Luke and here in Acts. By the way it's believed that Luke wrote the book of Acts. But there are differences between the account in Luke and the account in Acts. In Luke it seems to happen within 48 hours or so of the resurrection rather than after 40 days.

For the most part, the commentaries I read skipped over the ascension and moved on to the part about witness and the promise of the Holy Spirit from this passage. The Holy Spirit and the ascended Jesus can even get sort of mushed together.

But there is an important theological distinction between the ascended Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and it should actually have an impact on how we see ourselves as the church.

Because the ascension involves seeing things in a way our brains don't do especially well with, it's tough to preach. But we'll give it a shot.

I also need to give credit to Anglican biblical scholar NT Wright whose writings have shaped much of my understanding of resurrection, ascension, and heaven.

Many paintings and stained-glass windows show a picture of the sky with Jesus' feet sticking out of a cloud. The image upholds the bodily ascension of Jesus which is important.

But the implication is that Jesus went to some far away space called heaven that is removed from us. We, myself included, often think only in terms of the presence of the Holy Spirit on earth since Jesus' ascension. But that view is incomplete.

It is true that the promised Holy Spirit does come to enliven and empower the church and us as Jesus' followers. The risk is that the church can think of itself as a body that can't go wrong because the Spirit is guiding them. That church can all too often mistake their own desires and opinions for the work of the spirit in them. That sort of church might believe that it should be able to rule over all people in the name of Jesus. That has all too often ended disastrously.

At the other end is a completely spiritualized ascension. It's a view that says Jesus was human flesh and blood for awhile but then went back to being only God – only Spirit – and went off to be in heaven.

Both views envision a heaven separate from us. Therein lies the problem. To grasp the ascension, we need to be reminded that heaven and earth aren't completely separate places.

They are separate dimensions of reality that are intertwined. Heaven is God's space, but as the Celtic Christians say there are thin places – places where the two touch. Because Jesus is the eternal Word, through whom everything came into being and who became human, he is the bridge between heaven and earth. When he returns and his work is completely finished, heaven and earth will be one.

Heaven is the space that has the ability to be everywhere all at once – it touches our world and is even revealed at times in our world – those thin places.

So, when the resurrected Jesus ascends into heaven, it's not a physical upward move but a move into the dimension we call heaven. NT Wright also refers to this space as the control room, or the CEO's office. It is the place from where the risen Christ rules over both heaven and earth.

The understanding of the ascension is in no small part dependent on a Triune God. Which is also what makes it hard to grasp. The ascended Christ rules over heaven and earth, but works through the Holy Spirit within us. At least that's the best I can understand it.

Maybe we really can't grasp ascension in a way we might Newton's 3<sup>rd</sup> law. But like we might not be able to grasp quantum theory, its impacts are measurable.

So, here's what the ascension seems to mean for the church.

Because Christ has ascended into this realm we call heaven, he is everywhere all at once all the time with all of us. That's different from the Holy Spirit within us. The ascended Christ stands outside of us.

He does not rule with force, like Caesar. Instead, he rules by the same pattern of his earthly mission. He sends out his disciples – us – to do the things he did. To heal...to forgive...to feed...to teach about the kingdom of God...in short, to witness.

He empowers us through the spirit. But unlike the Holy Spirit, the ascended Christ is outside of us, so the ascended Christ can stand in judgement of the church when the church fails...or worse becomes corrupt in its mission.

The Holy Spirit in us points to the risen and ascended Christ when our own egos and agendas get in the way of our mission.

The risen and ascended Christ also is how we celebrate the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine of communion. We do not just believe that Christ is present in the bread and wine as spirit, but truly and physically present. It's like the bread and wine are one of those thin places where heaven and earth touch and the ascended Christ becomes something we can see and taste.

So the angels say to us the same thing they said to those early disciples. Why do you stand looking up at heaven? You've got work to do.

Because we too are called to bear witness to all that Jesus taught. We're called to bear witness to the world's desire to crush the way of life he stood for. We're called to bear witness to his resurrection as a sign that in the end, the world cannot crush Jesus' way of love, peace, and justice.

And whenever we find that work too daunting, we are reminded that the risen Jesus is with us every step of the way.

