
Time to Go

Acts 1.1-11, Luke 24.44-53

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 20, 2007 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

One of the most helpful lessons I've learned about management is called the Four Stages of Work. Stage One is called Unconscious Incompetence – you don't know what you don't know. We all know what that means – it means coming into a new environment and trying desperately hard not to embarrass yourself or show your ignorance or lack of appropriate skills. It means looking back and cringing at some of the things you said and did on your first day at work. The second stage is called Conscious Incompetence – you know what you don't know. This is what people call a fast learning curve – you realize there's a whole history, vocabulary, set of relationships and approach to the job you've got to master, and you have a sense of the scope of what those are but you know you're a way off having them just yet. The third stage is Conscious Competence – you know what you know. This is when you are thriving in your work and on top of every aspect of it. The task of the manager is to get you to this point as quickly as possible and keep you there as long as possible. But there is a fourth stage, called Unconscious Competence – where you've forgotten what you know. We all reach this stage sooner or later, and when we do it's time to stop or do something else. Those who like to say "Son, I've forgotten more than you'll ever know" aren't doing themselves many favors, because the point is, they've forgotten it, so it's useless to them or anyone else. The people you want around are people nearing the end of stage two – and if you think you're turning into a stage four person it's time to look for another place where you can become a stage two or three person.

The trouble is, it's hard to retire. Even if the truth is that we've been at stage four for years, we create a fantasy that we can stay at stage three and remain consciously competent indefinitely. The fantasy may blend a number of layers of self-deception. We may say to ourselves "I don't think they could cope without me." Or we could pretend "I want to get this organization to such a level that my successor can't ruin it." Or we could think "I've given a lot to this place, the least I can ask in return is that I get to serve out my last few years without the same level of expectation on me." Or we might have been humiliated by having been shown, perhaps repeatedly, how dispensable our services were and so be determined to hang on to a post so at last we would be the one to decide, rather than simply be told, when to leave. But in all these stories really we may be hiding the truth, which may be more like this: "If I don't come to work I don't know who I am – all I have left is the unresolved issues in my home, the mirror of my own mortality, and rather less money coming in to make either more palatable."

Retirement is a relatively new phenomenon in human experience. It arises from increasing longevity, which means most of us live longer than our span of paid employment, and increasing affluence, which means more than a tiny minority can afford to spend their later days without a full weekly salary. It offers an opportunity that previous generations didn't have.

I want to suggest to you this morning that the story and doctrine of Jesus' ascension to heaven may speak to the stories we tell ourselves about retirement. The doctrine of the ascension is pieced together from the different New Testament accounts. Mark and John tell us nothing about it. Matthew records a final conversation with the disciples on the mountain in Galilee but doesn't tell us what happened next. Luke seems to record all his Easter stories, including the one we read today of Jesus being carried up to heaven, as happening on one day. Paul assumes that Jesus who died and was raised is now at the right hand of the Father. Only the book of Acts gives us the timeframe that shapes the Church's year, placing Ascension forty days after Easter and Pentecost ten days after that.

Ascension tends to be neglected in the Church's imagination. Those who get stuck on the physics of it find it hard to see past ancient paintings where Jesus' feet are glimpsed disappearing out of the top of the picture. Those for whom faith is largely a matter of personal piety concentrate on letting Jesus reign as king of their hearts. But both of these perspectives miss the key theological issues involved in Jesus' Ascension, of which I suggest there are four, each of which I propose has something to say about retirement.

The first thing the Ascension tells us is that Jesus stopped because he'd finished. He really had done everything he needed to do. He really had given us everything we needed to receive. This claim is at the heart of Christian theology and the peg on which it hangs is called the doctrine of the Ascension. But it's always unfashionable because Christians tend to be less thrilled with what God has done than they are bewildered by what God hasn't done. Given us life, given us creation, given us a covenant friendship, restored that friendship over and over, given us Jesus, given us forgiveness, given us eternal life, yeah yeah yeah blah blah blah. We take that part for granted. But what about hunger, what about disasters, what about AIDS, what about war? It's as if we're so mesmerized by the market economy that we see even our relationship with God as a market transaction and we feel the contents of salvation aren't what it said on the side of the tin so we want our money back. All we can think of is what God hasn't given us.

And into this litany of what's wrong with God comes the doctrine of the Ascension. Jesus went back where he came from because he'd finished. He'd finished. He didn't hang around to work on a few odd jobs around the edges of salvation – there was *no more to do*. Now a lot of us rebels against this – surely there's plenty left unredeemed in the world. How can Jesus have finished? Well, he'd taken the poison out of the sting of sin, he'd shown us the heart of God, and he'd broken through the wall of death. In other words, he'd done what only God could do, what matters most – and he'd left the rest to us. Seems a good deal to me. Salvation remains today what it was on Ascension Day. Not a life without disappointment, a life without discomfort, a life without disillusionment; but a life with a faith to look back on, a hope to look forward to, and a love to live.

I'm not holding up Jesus as a comprehensive model for retirement. I'm not saying we should all go at 33 having achieved salvation for the world. But I do want you to notice the logic of what it means to say Jesus stopped when he'd finished. It means none of us is indispensable. Jesus is indispensable – he did what no one else could or can. But you and I are not indispensable. If we live our lives thinking we're the only one who can save the world, we're not just insulting our colleagues, wearing out our family members and heading for burnout ourselves – we're actually denying that Jesus has already saved the world. Of course there are crisis moments when it may be we can bring something important or even unique to a situation: but to create a world in which every moment is one of those crisis moments is to make up a story in which we take the place of God. It's a lot easier to retire when you recall that Jesus has already done the real work.

I said there were four lessons from Jesus' Ascension – so here's the second one. Wherever Jesus went on the day of his Ascension – whether he really went up or just went up “in a very real sense” – either way he went somewhere. Where did the bodily Jesus go? The point about the doctrine of the Ascension is not so much that Jesus went up as that he went somewhere – and that that somewhere is at least as real as here. I say “at least as real” because it may be more real. This life is passing, everything in this existence is relative, this world will one day pass away: but where Jesus is, at the right hand of the Father, is for keeps. What we call “heaven” is the company of God – the presence of God where all are gathered as God's companions. Imagine that for a moment. There is another world, more real than this one.

What that means for retirement is that you don't have to get it all right this time round. People love to say “life isn't a rehearsal.” Well it is, actually. You don't have to get it all done, you don't have to leave it all tidy, you don't have to ensure it for ever remains just the way it is now. Jesus has gone to the place where all is as it should be, and the promise of the coming kingdom is that God's heaven will someday come to God's earth, so that all is finally as it should be. Not because you and I got it right, but because God said “It is finished.” People do sometimes get depressed when they retire. It's a very serious matter. But we don't want to collude with the notion that when you finish work you have nothing to look forward to. You have everything to look forward to. You are a step away from thinking the world depends on you, and a step closer to discovering how everything depends on God. You're closer to the *real* real world.

And the third lesson from the doctrine of Jesus' Ascension is that Jesus was fully human. That means he can only be at one place at a time. Ascension means that Jesus is no longer on earth – he is in heaven. Being divine didn't make Jesus any less human – it made him more human. It made him more alive, more aware of the wonder of creation, more bursting with joy and compassion and laughter and reflection, all those uniquely human attributes. But Jesus' being human, as we always reflect on at Christmas, means he also entered fully into the more mundane aspects of human life. And this brings us back to retirement. Because retirement is in

many ways coming to terms with the more mundane aspects of human life. You haven't got a mask to put on each day to protect yourself from your fragile reflection in the mirror. But you are as fully alive as you ever were, as fully human as a young graduate starting out on a career.

And that brings us to the final lesson from the doctrine of the Ascension. We find it in the words of the two men in white robes who speak to the disciples after a cloud has taken Jesus from their sight: "Why do you stand looking upward towards heaven?" In other words, Jesus may have finished, but this could mean a whole new beginning for you. If retirement is just about looking back, is just about leaving, is just about wistfully pondering the past in nostalgia or regret, then it's bound to be distressing. But it must also be about the future. We may retire from work, but we don't retire from being a disciple. And while we may experience a vocation to a walk of life such as business, teaching, healthcare or even ordained ministry, that professional vocation never exhausts what it means for us to be a disciple. Retirement can be a time when we make new and transforming discoveries in understanding scripture, making friendships, enriching service, befriending children, sharing faith, and building up the Church. The words "Why do you stand looking up to heaven?" are a challenge to us to remember that God still has good things in store, that the best is yet to come, that the future is always bigger than the past.

Not everyone here today may have thought much about retirement, but sooner or later it's an issue for almost all of us. Jesus' ascension shows us some significant things. It shows us he had finished, and thus that salvation doesn't depend on us, but on him. It shows us that there is another place more real than this one, and thus that we don't have to hold out in this life till we have everything just right. It shows us that Jesus was fully human, and thus not to be fearful or ashamed of our own human needs and frailties. And it shows us that there's no use lamenting what's gone because there are still fresh discoveries in discipleship to be made. And if we still face the reality of our retirement, sooner or later, with bewilderment, Jesus has the same transforming words for us as he had for the disciples that first Ascensiontide. Whether you are on the threshold of retirement, or of any other of life's great transitions, think about these closing words: "Stay in the city, and you will be clothed with power from on high."