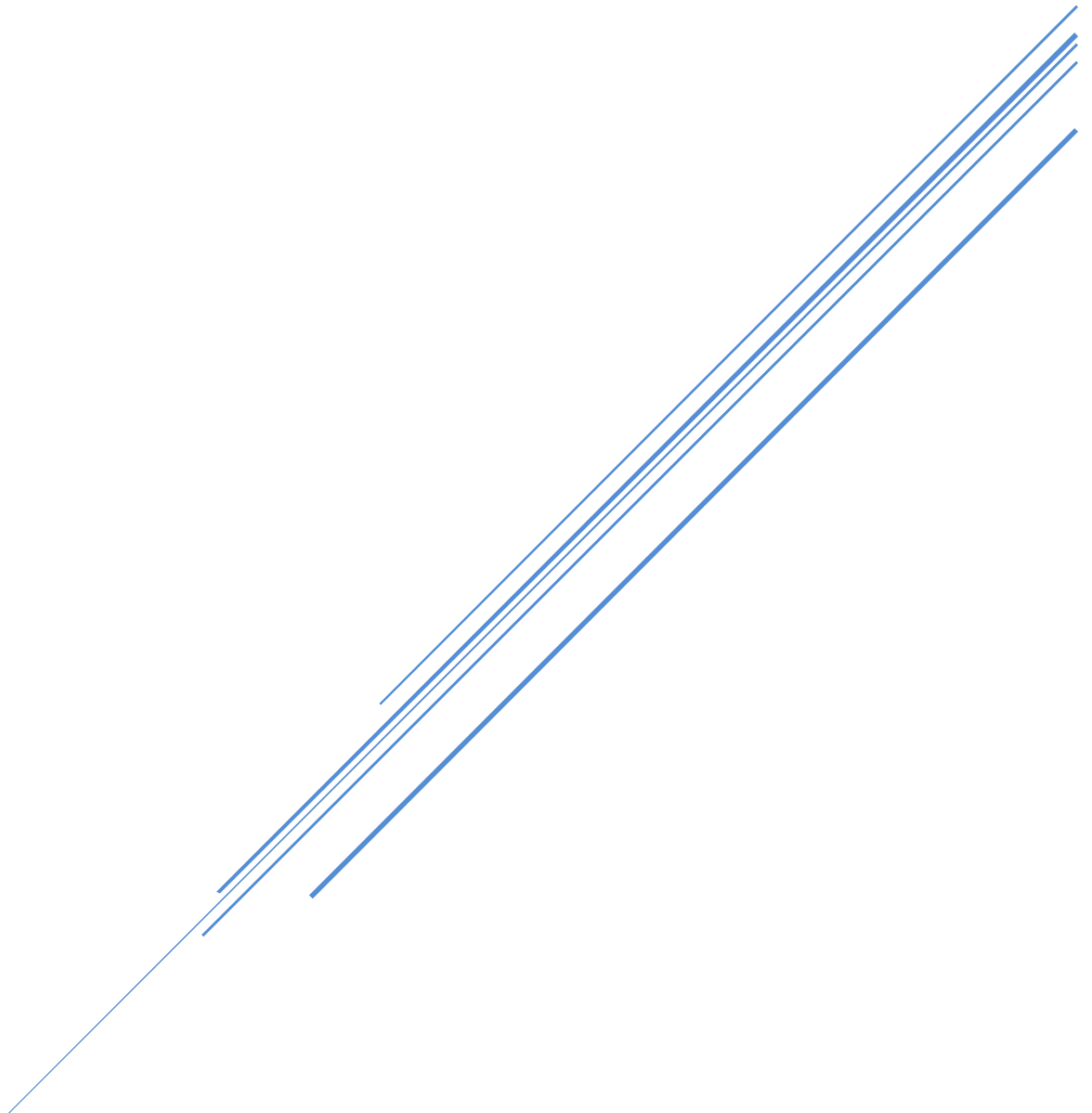

DON'T JUST STAND THERE!

May 17, 2015 – Acts 1:1-11



Brad Walston

Every once in a while we find ourselves faced with certain events in the Bible that are just plain unexplainable. I mean, how weird is it for our sensible, reasonable, 21st century brains to comprehend the idea that Jesus somehow floated up into the sky to sit at the right hand of the creator of the universe. While there certainly is no shortage of confusing and downright unbelievable things in the Bible, this is probably one of the weirdest. We just can't relate to it – how can we? Look at some of the things we know about the life of Jesus:

He was born to a human mother. Easy.

He ate and drank and he slept at night. He also took naps. I can definitely relate to that!

He loved people. He got angry. He forgave people. He wept. He died.

And He rose from the dead.

I submit to you that these are all things to which we can relate to some degree – even the resurrection is an event that we probably have some firsthand knowledge of... Easter experiences, joy in the midst of sorrow; life from death, and the feeling of being reborn or re-created.

But “ascending into heaven and sitting at the right Hand of God?” I just don't relate to that. Do you?

Even Paul, who wrote half of the New Testament, refers to Jesus' ascension as a great mystery. It's a mystery because no human mind can fully grasp it. So what happens? We spend so much time and energy trying to understand and explain the mysteries of our faith that we lose sight of the real message. Maybe we should just let it be. After all, there will always be things we don't understand. Why can't we let God be one of them? For centuries, scholars, pastors, artists have all tried to make sense of the ascension in their own way.

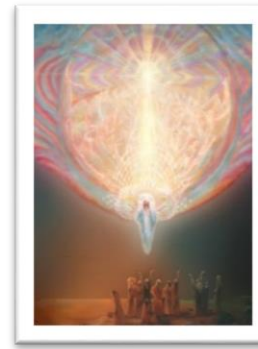
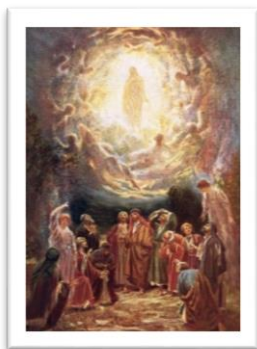
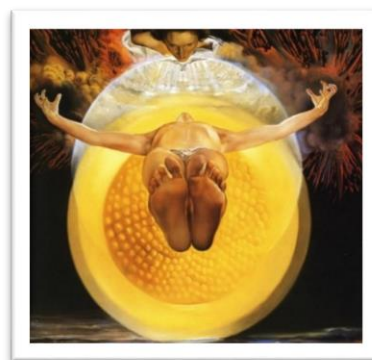


This is Raphael's famous painting called “Transfiguration.” This is probably the most famous portrayal of the Jesus' ascension. As you can see, the disciples are gathered around at the bottom there. See the confusion and chaos. And there's Jesus, levitating, floating up like that balloon, with a couple of angels floating alongside him. Notice though, that with everything that's going on in this painting, our eye is drawn to Jesus' feet --Right in the center. Raphael has made Jesus feet be the focal point of the painting – and they're still walking.



Here's another example from the middle ages. You can't see this very clearly but do you see those two blobs hanging down from the top? Those are Jesus' feet. I love this one because that's the only part of Jesus that we actually CAN see – his feet sticking out from the clouds, while the disciples all stand around looking up.

Finally – and this is probably the most surreal of all of them, we have the ascension as envisioned by Salvador Dali. I love this because we get to see the ascension through the eyes of the disciples. Of course, they're looking up so all we can see is the bottom of Jesus' feet. William Barclay, one of my favorite commentators, once wrote, "No one has ever succeeded in painting a picture of the Ascension which was anything other than grotesque and ridiculous." Here's a few more...



The ascension is hard enough to visualize, but even harder to really understand. Maybe in the first century it was a little easier for people to get it. After all, the world was flat back then. The Hebrew worldview of the time had God walking around somewhere up on top of this dome that made up the sky or the 'heavens.' Same word, by the way, *ouranos*, means 'sky' and 'heaven, as opposed to the ground or earth.

Greek mythology was also very popular back then – Zeus sitting up there on Mt Olympus ruling over the other Gods. Worldviews like these would make it easier to imagine Jesus floating up to sit in a big chair on a cloud with God – who also happens to be an old white guy with a beard and a really deep voice, right? But we've moved on from these

viewpoints though. The world isn't flat, the sky is not a dome, and God is not a hairy old man, and our questions are sounding a little silly...

When Jesus rose up through the clouds, when did he stop? Or did he?

When did he stop? Where did he stop? What about the atmosphere?

The idea of Christ floating up to heaven and disappearing into the clouds is rather whimsical. Does Jesus fly? Does he clench his right fist and take off like Superman? Maybe he gets beamed up like Star Trek. Like the disciples, I imagine that I, too, would've been awestruck – I can see myself standing there, staring up at the sky, watching his feet as he gets smaller and smaller... Maybe the wondering is part of it. Maybe it's not supposed to make real, concrete sense.

But maybe it tells us something about Jesus. If we stop trying to force it – to make the Ascension understandable to our brilliant, but limited human brains – and let it be a mystery, maybe we will hear the Good News.

When the Bible talks about Jesus' Ascension, maybe the meaning is clearer than we realize. This was the very last moment of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. Those feet would never walk the earth again – or the water either! It was the end of Jesus' bodily presence. It was the end of the resurrection appearances. But as you know, an ending is more often than not also a beginning, isn't it? It was the beginning of Jesus' heavenly reign. When scripture says Jesus was "seated at the right hand of God," it doesn't mean that Jesus was literally sitting in some kind of divine La-Z-Boy. It means that Jesus occupies the place of supreme honor. Typically a King or ruler would keep a seat at his right for those whom he chose to honor – a special guest, maybe a foreign dignitary. So, in spite of Jesus horrific and shameful execution like a criminal, we know that his life, death, and resurrection was justified and blessed by God. There is not one of us, no area, region, country, on this earth or beyond that is outside the reign of Jesus.

That's one of the things I like about Dali's portrayal of Jesus from the perspective of the disciples. It puts all of us, you me the disciples, all of creation under Christ's feet. Did you notice how many of the other paintings also remind us not of Jesus face, or his arms, or his hands, but his feet?

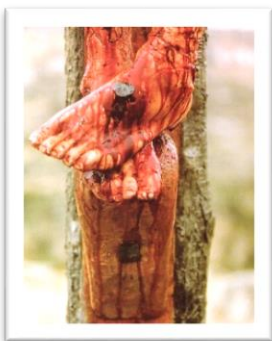
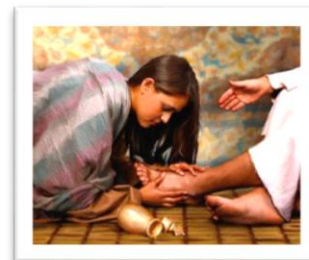
These are the feet that carried him from town to town, mile after mile, healing the sick, forgiving the sinner, loving the unlovable. When the Bible describes scenes where Jesus is teaching, it talks about how people sat at his feet.





These are the feet that walked on water and calmed our storms.

These are the feet that a sinful woman washed with her tears and dried with her hair; out of pure love for Jesus.



These are the feet that were nailed to the cross; the feet with the wounds that Jesus let Thomas touch, who then proclaimed, "My Lord, my God!"

When we speak of the ascension we proclaim with Thomas that not only is Jesus our Lord and God, but that Jesus' earthly ministry came to an end; that those feet took their last step, leaving the disciples and eventually you and me to carry on Jesus' ministry, his work, and his love for all people.

The Ascension is like the threshold. It's the point from which we can look back to the past – at Jesus' ministry on earth, but at the same time we can look forward to our own ministry today.

Outside Jerusalem you can visit the Chapel of the Ascension, rumored to be the very site of Jesus' Ascension. Inside you'd expect to find all kinds of artistic depictions and interpretations of this final, remarkable moment. But instead, on the floor is a small square of dirt surrounded by cement.



Tradition holds that this seemingly insignificant little square of dirt preserves the very last footprint of Jesus, the very last step he took before his ministry on this earth ended. All over the Holy Land you can hear stories like this – Jesus walked here, Jesus fed the 5,000 here, Jesus slept here. We'd be wise to take these stories with a grain of salt. But so what? Even if it isn't the exact spot where Jesus floated away, it doesn't lessen the poignancy of the

moment. The fact that Jesus last moment on the planet is memorialized by a footprint must mean something.

I'd like to think that visitors to the Chapel of the Ascension get one last reminder of all the places Jesus feet carried him – all the people whose lives he touched; welcoming them, healing them, forgiving them, and just plain loving them. I'd like to think that they get one last reminder that when Jesus said 'Follow me,' maybe that's what he really meant – that every place Jesus put His feet, we should put ours as well.

Teresa of Avila wrote this prayer:

Lord Christ,

You have no body on earth but ours; no hands but ours; no feet but ours.

Ours are the eyes through which your compassion must look out on the world.

Ours are the feet by which you may still go about doing good.

Ours are the hands with which you bless people now.

Bless our minds and our bodies, that we may be a blessing to others.

Amen.