

Views from the Pews - The mystery of the Ascension

Old-world cosmic geography envisaged a three-layered universe described in terms of what people could see from their own vantage point. If water descends from above as rain, there must be a reservoir of water up there. But it doesn't come down all the time, so there must be something holding most of it back, like a solid dome, a firmament. Something must hold the firmament up, like the mountains surrounding the flat earthen plate on which they lived. Water also comes up from the ground, so there must be waters under the earth as well. God and his angels and saints surely could live only high above the earth, beyond the firmament, in the incorruptible heavens remote from the mess and decay and wicked desecrations on the earth. Hence people assumed that heaven was located above the visible sky, so it was logical to look up in search of God.

This idea was held quite literally by people of the time, including Jesus himself.

Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" John 20:27.

[Stephen], filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Acts 7:55

So on the day that the risen Jesus met with the disciples for the last time, to give them his commission and his blessing, they saw him in human form, just as they had always known him. But he was somehow different from any ordinary physical man, because he then simply disappeared from their sight. Given their understanding of a three-layered cosmos, they did not need to ask where he had gone. It was only obvious and reasonable to report that Jesus had been literally carried up high above the firmament, to be restored to the presence of God the Father in heaven.

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. Luke 24:50-51

Old habits die hard. Even though we know that heaven is not literally up there above the sky, we still look up to find God.

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