

May 24, 2009  
The Ascension of Our Lord  
Acts 1:1-11  
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

## *SPACE TRAVEL*

I love the word for Ascension Day in German. *Christi Himmelfahrt*. Maybe it's the adolescent boy in me that loves to wish someone a happy Ascension Day: *fröhliche Christi Himmelfahrt*. Last Thursday, Ascension Day, was a public holiday in Germany. Perhaps uncomfortable with a holiday named after Jesus floating up to heaven, some Germans want to change the name of the holiday to Evolution Day.

*Himmelfahrt* literally means "going to heaven" or it seems to me, "heaven travel." If you think *himmelfahrt* is funny word, consider *schlittenfahrt*, which means "sleigh ride." Sorry. I digress.

Remember the wizard of Oz floating up to the sky in a hot-air balloon? There are times we gaze upward. When we ponder the beauty of cloud patterns. When we wonder if there will be rain. When we watch a plane take off or land. Or if you're in Cape Canaveral this morning, looking for the space shuttle Atlantis to land.

Our ancient ancestors must have been filled with awe when they looked up to the sky. To their pre-scientific minds, Jesus ascending into heaven must have seemed to them like space travel seems to us. Mind-boggling. In Luke we read that as Jesus was blessing his followers he was carried up into heaven. The account from Acts says that Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Maybe they thought of Elijah and Enoch, two figures who were believed to be taken up to heaven. Maybe they thought of two verses from the psalms. One we sang today: "God has gone up with a shout!" Or listen to this one: "You ride in the heavens, O God." Maybe there should be a hymn: A Divine Space Traveler Is Our God!"

Imagining Jesus traveling the heavens may miss the point of the Ascension story. Jesus leaves his disciples and promises that he will send the Holy Spirit to enliven their witness to the ends of the earth. The awe-struck disciples are told to stop gawking up, to get their heads out of the clouds. Jesus promises that he will be with them to the close of the age. His body now gone, they will be his body. All of them. All of us.

Metaphorically we say that the risen, ascended Jesus sits at God's right hand. Enthroned upon the heavens. But this Christ travels beyond space and time. The author of Ephesians says it in a cosmic way. Jesus ascended far above the heavens that he might fill all things. What an awesome thought. Jesus' presence, his power, his essence, his message, his energy fill our very being and enliven all the universe.

It's not just space travel that intrigues people today. There is continued fascination about traveling beyond the limits of space and time. Reincarnation. Life after death. Séances. To name a few.

Consider this article in the current *Newsweek*: "I, Robot: One Man's Quest to Become a Computer." Ray Kurzweil is an inventor, author and computer scientist who bills himself as a futurist. Kurzweil believes that computer intelligence is evolving so quickly that in a couple of decades computers will be smarter than human beings. And the only way to keep up with them will be to merge with them. He considers it the next great leap in human evolution. In fact Kurzweil is on a strict diet to "reprogram" his body's biochemistry. He hopes that he can live to the year 2045 when he believes we will have the necessary technologies for us to live on, inside computers, forever and ever, amen.

Some critics say that this is simply New Age spiritualism. That even geeks want to find God somewhere. Kurzweil is consumed with the idea that computers might extend our lives and even make us immortal. He is also trying to come to terms with the untimely death of his father decades ago, imagining his father coming back to life. Kurzweil would use DNA from his father's grave and use a swarm of nanobots to create a new body indistinguishable from the original one. He would download old letters and other materials along with his memories into an artificial intelligence program to create a "virtual person."

Kurzweil is a futurist. Some of his predictions, many that would have blown our minds a couple of decades ago, have

come true. Others have not. But clearly he is fascinated with the possibility of transcending space and time. Of traveling to realms previously unimagined.

If the disciples were told to stop gazing into heaven, I wonder what we would be told today? Stop living in the past and in the future? Claim the power of the Spirit that is within you? Open your eyes to the people in need and the earth in peril? Turn off your machines and get more in touch with your body and your loved ones? Get grounded as an earth being?

Jesus promises to be with us to the end of the age. It seems that could be either the end of the world or the end of our lives. As much as technology moves forward at an unbelievable speed, we are left with hearts that pump blood and lungs that take in air. We are left with our very human memories and hopes, sadness and joy.

We keep traveling through life. Sometimes we can't believe how quickly it passes. We have our own questions about the future. And many more questions about the present and all the problems in our world or the challenges in our own lives. I doubt that answers will come from looking up to the heavens. Rather Christ comes down to us.

Let us say it more boldly: on this Lord's Day the risen Christ dwells among us and in us. *Christus fährt unter uns*. "Christ goes among us" would be one way to say it. Christ travels among us. Comes among us. Lives among his people. Especially the poor, the humble and all those who look to the sky, hoping for an end to their suffering.

Even on the day that we celebrate Jesus' going up to heaven, we proclaim that he comes down. Christ reveals himself in word and silence, in bread and wine, in the assembly gathered here and in the hopes and dreams that fill our imaginations. More than a virtual person, the risen Christ appears to us. Nourishes us with holy food. And sends us forth as witnesses to all that we have seen and heard.

*Fröhliche Christi Himmelfahrt.*  
Happy Ascension!