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This past Thursday was a Christian holiday, though I imagine few of us noticed it or had a party. According to the Gospel of Luke, during the weeks after the Easter news of Jesus' resurrection, Jesus remained with his followers, continuing to teach and remind them that he would always be with them. The book of Acts, also written by Luke, begins with Jesus teaching for forty days until he ascended into heaven. Can you guess the name of the holiday to commemorate this event of Jesus ascending into heaven? Ascension Day, which means the day of going up into heaven. Did anyone celebrate the day this week?

This holiday began in the first century of the church, combined with Easter and Pentecost into one celebration, but by the fourth century Ascension Day became its own holiday, celebrated forty days after Easter. Beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, worshipers in Germany commemorated the day along with Father's Day, celebrating that Jesus had returned to the Father. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some towns had parades on Ascension Day.<sup>1</sup>

In Florence, Italy, families celebrate the tradition of Festa del Grillo, the Cricket Festival, with ties to

Ascension Day. The connection between these two events is blurry, but some suggest that cricket larva has been underground all winter and takes flight in May, a reminder of the resurrection and Jesus' ascent into heaven. Children used to capture or purchase crickets and carry them around in little wooden cages until the sale of crickets became illegal in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

In light of all these celebrations, I thought we might want to look closer at Luke's story of the Ascension. Although I didn't find any crickets in the Bible story, I did find some other surprising things. Let's take a look.

When we examine the story a bit closer, we discover some discrepancies since Luke tells two different stories, one in the book of Luke, and the other in the book of Acts.

First, at the end of Luke's Gospel, the Ascension occurred soon after the Easter resurrection, but in Acts it occurred forty days after the resurrection.

Secondly, in Luke, the event occurred near the town of Bethany, but in Acts it occurs on the Mount of Olives.<sup>3</sup>

Third, in Luke's narrative, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and gathered in public in the temple blessing

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God. In Acts, the disciples gathered in a small private upper room for prayer.

And finally, in Acts, we have a depiction of Jesus being lifted up on a cloud into the heavens, with the disciples standing there, gazing up into heaven. It's tempting to dismiss this story as a fanciful tale, for our modern minds wonder, "Seriously? Riding on a cloud? Lifted into the sky?"

We may want to get into theological arguments about the location of heaven, explaining that the ancient cosmology of early believers placed heaven just above the earth, while our modern telescopes have peered beyond the edge of the earth's atmosphere to billions of light-years into space without any glimpse of Jesus sitting in heaven.

And then we could argue that Luke wasn't consistent with the details of the event—shifting the timeline and location. As we're pondering these discrepancies, and possibly even arguing amongst ourselves, the voice of the two men dressed in white robes from Acts call to us as they did to those early followers: "Why do you stand there gazing up into heaven?" Or paraphrased for today, "Why are you

standing around arguing about the details of what happened. Look around and see what God is already doing in the world around you."

I wonder if Luke intentionally built discrepancies of timing and location into his narratives to make a point—that we can't capture Jesus in one time or place, we can't pin down the details and capture Jesus and neatly wrap him up. Luke wasn't confused about the details. He hid a subtle message in the story—that we can encounter Christ in many locations, at any time, so stop standing there with your head looking into the clouds, wondering what happened to Jesus, and recognize God's presence among you here and now.

Sometimes we have to look around and notice, to pay attention. In the story from Exodus, for example, Moses saw a burning bush. We often focus on the miracle of the bush that was on fire but not burned up, but maybe the event was a way to get Moses to pause and notice. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner wondered,

"How long would you have to watch wood burning before you could know whether or not it actually was being consumed? Even dry kindling wood is not burned up for several minutes. This then would mean that Moses would have had to watch the

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‘amazing sight’ closely for several minutes before he could possibly know there even was a miracle to watch!”<sup>4</sup>

Rather than focusing on the burning bush as a miracle, maybe it was an opportunity for Moses to pay attention for more than a few minutes. To stop and notice. To sense God’s presence in that place.

For centuries, mystics have reminded us to notice God each day, to stop and sense God’s presence in the midst of our ordinary activities—while preparing dinner or washing the dishes, while pulling weeds or harvesting lettuce in the garden, while watching your child play or reading your grandchild a story, while watching the sunset or looking at a mountain.

As we take time to notice, to pause, we may begin to sense God’s presence in the ordinary moments,

even in our times of loss, which contemporary writer Mirabai Starr suggests in her book *Wild Mercy*:

Everything feels inexhaustibly holy. This is not what they taught you in the church of your childhood. Your soul has been formed in the forge of life’s losses, galvanized in the crucible of community, fertilized by the rain of relationship, blessed by your intimacy with Mother Earth. You have glimpsed the face of the Divine where you least expected it.<sup>5</sup>

Some may try to convince us that God is “out there” somewhere, distant and far away, prompting us to stand there gazing up, wondering where to find God. Instead, look around at those ordinary moments of your life, take time to notice, and there you may discover the presence of God, who has been alongside you all along.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nationaltoday.com/ascension-day/>

<sup>2</sup> [www.visitflorence.com/florence-events/may-in-florence.html](http://www.visitflorence.com/florence-events/may-in-florence.html)

<sup>3</sup> Compare Luke 24:50-51 with Acts 1:1-12.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *God was in this Place and I did not know*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Starr, Mirabai. *Wild Mercy* (p. 10). Sounds True. Kindle Edition.