

When my son was about 14 he went through a stage where he loved rockets. You've probably seen them in hobby stores. You can buy the basic rocket which looks like the core of a paper towel roll, with a plastic nose cone and a parachute. You can paint it, or apply decals, and make them look quite authentic. Then you buy a launch pad, which includes a battery to ignite the engine, and of course the engines themselves, which are something like large firecrackers. We would take the rocket into the field next to our house and set it up, stand back, and blast off. It was amazing how high and fast those toy rockets would travel. I think it is in the imagination of every boy or girl that tries rockets, that they might actually get one into orbit, but of course, they fall back to earth when the rocket engine gives out, and glides back on its parachute.

It may not be exactly appropriate that that image comes to my mind when I think about the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. Reading the account in Acts, the disciples are standing around talking with Jesus, when he is whisked away and disappears into a cloud. Maybe he really did reach orbit! But perhaps I am being too sacrilegious.

The account of the Ascension may well be one of those biblical passages that puts a stumbling block in the way of seekers. It just seems too fantastical, too strange to modern ears. Luke wrote this account in a time when everyone believed in a three-tiered universe, with earth being the place where living humans act and think, the sky is heaven where God resides and where good people go, and hell is the place of heat and fire well below the earth. In fact, Luke is the only who writes about the Ascension, with a short mention at the end of his gospel, and his account in Acts, written about 50 years after Jesus' death. It may well be that the story of Jesus' departure was slightly embroidered for dramatic effect. Or not.

But there is no doubting that Jesus did depart. We do not have the chance, like Thomas did, to touch his wounds, to see him face to face, to hear him teach. Oh that we could: then, surely then, we would believe. Then, surely then, we would follow him. But of course, then, even then, people found reasons not to believe, not to follow. And so, probably, would we. But I would suggest that Jesus did not rocket off into the clouds, into outer space beyond reach, but rather into inner space. Jesus has come to rest in the hearts of all humanity, where he has been known by men and women for thousands of years. It is there, in our hearts, that we can know Jesus as surely as if we could touch his wounds with our fingers.

Yes, Jesus lives with God the Father. Yes, Jesus sent to us the Holy Spirit to be with us and sustain us. But that does not mean that Jesus is absent. Bodily, perhaps, but not in spirit. Father, Holy Spirit, Christ are one, indivisible, and if we are in relation with one person of the Trinity, we are in relation with all of God. Meister Eckardt, the 13th century mystic and theologian, pictured the Trinity as a community in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existed in a constant circulation of love, bubbling over in abundance to bathe all humanity with that love. We are constantly being held in the love of Jesus. We have long had difficulty in explaining and picturing what heaven might be like, how God is interrelated, and how we are related to it. We know that heaven is not some particular place located in the sky. We begin to see that heaven is all around us, permeating us, interacting with us in a sort of spiritual reality invisible to our eyes, but not our hearts.

Sadly, there are many among us who cannot see this spiritual reality, who can see only the here and now, the physical and the present moment. They miss, I think, the transcendence that we crave, the sense that we fit into a larger picture, that we are part of God's purpose. They think that because they cannot see it, the spiritual world does not exist. It is frightening to think

that all that we have to depend on, all that we have to fall back on is ourselves and our own abilities. It is frightening because we know that in the end, we are inadequate to the task. We know that we will die, and leave our tasks unfinished. When our relationships depend on our own strength of love, our own force of character, our own goodness, we fear that we might lose it all in a moment of weakness.

But those of us who sense the nearness of Jesus know that there is another kind of glue that keeps it all together. We don't have to depend only on ourselves to keep up our relationships, because we have the example of Jesus to show us that forgiveness is possible, even when we mess up. We don't have to fear being alone in times of trial, because we know that Jesus is with us. We don't have to worry that we will lose our salvation because we have let down our defenses for a moment, and so we can relax and enjoy the gifts of life and creation that we have been given.

To live that way means that we live with a foot in both worlds, the physical, and the spiritual. We live on the threshold, on the edge of two worlds. That can be both a confusing place to be, as well as a wonderful adventure. On the threshold we live with a sense of expectancy, but not for the same things other people expect. We know that the spiritual can break in on us at any moment, and that we can experience God first hand, even if not always in sharp focus. On the threshold we expect that all things will come out OK in the end, because Jesus has said so, not because we have planned our retirement well. On the threshold we expect that we will gain a clearer understanding of the spirit world when we die and are raised into the divinity of God ourselves. We expect that it will be more wonderful and awesome than we can possibly imagine.

But we cannot stay on the threshold forever. We can retreat back into our old familiar rooms and close the door, or we can move out beyond into the exciting new world. When we move beyond the threshold we live with a sense of adventure. We don't know exactly what will come next, but we know that it will challenge us, and from it we will find growth. We might even seek out those adventures that put us in places that will expand our minds and our hearts. That is why we are taking our youth on a mission trip to South Dakota. And yet, so many of us fear that growth. My old spiritual director used to be a pastor in the Keewenaw peninsula in northern Michigan. He said that he used to ask his youth group, if you could go anywhere in the world to see and visit, money being no object, where would you like to go? Eighty percent of them, he said, said they wanted to go to Green Bay. Living on the threshold can open our imaginations beyond that limited view. We are not meant to be so provincial.

Our view from the threshold may depend on whether we are looking back into our old room where there is safety and comfort and the familiar, or whether we are looking outward into the world where there are new things to discover, new things to do, new ways to grow, new relationships with God and each other. The threshold is our launching pad.

Of course moving outward beyond the threshold involves some risk. It can be scary to let go of our treasured traditions and security. That's why we need each other, to encourage each other, to help guide each other, to help carry each other's burdens when they become too heavy.

I don't know if Jesus rocketed off into heaven. But I do know that he launched a whole new way of being with God. I think we too, both individually and as a church, are poised on the launching pad. Will we safely stay on the ground? Or will we accept Christ's invitation to adventure and discovery and growth and launch ourselves beyond the threshold into a new and vital world? I say, let's all fly! Maybe we'll even reach orbit.