

# Presbyterians *Today*

MAY 2002

## Following Jesus to the mosque

How can we  
be faithful  
Christians  
in a world  
of many  
religions?



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WHAT PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE  
**The Ascension**  
A promise of great  
things to come

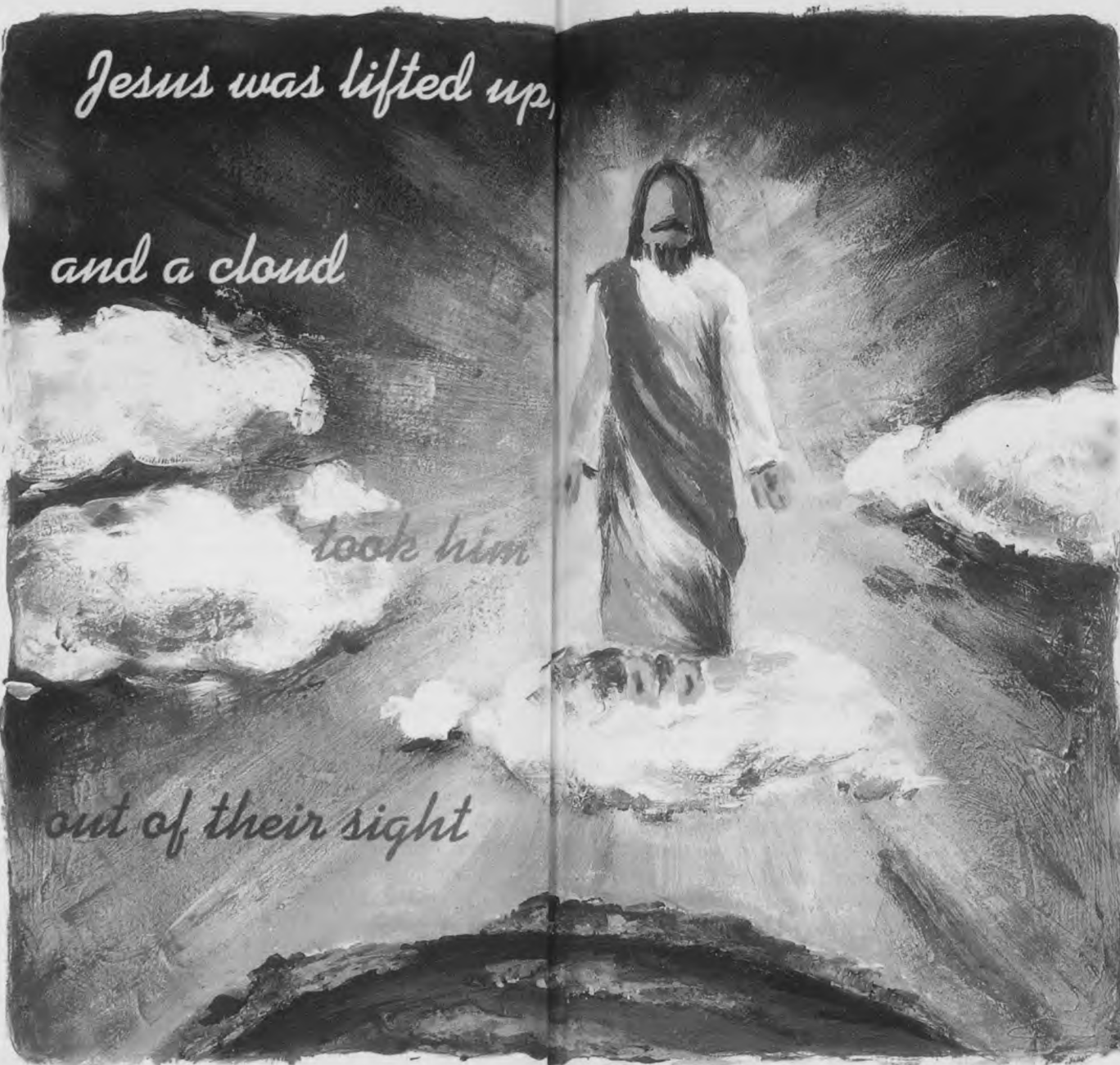
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WHAT PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE

# The Ascension— a promise of great things to come

BY JOHN S. McCLURE

**T**ucked away in a corner of most “stained-glass churches” is an “Ascension Window,” which usually depicts Jesus floating upward in flowing robes while distraught disciples look upward or cover their eyes in fear and anguish. In one painting of the Ascension, by Hans Süss von Kulmbach, we see only Jesus’ pierced feet and the hem of his robes sticking out from the top of the canvas amidst a cluster of clouds. Beneath him the apostles huddle and gaze upward in curiosity and amazement.

Most Presbyterians consider the Ascension to be an exotic notion, something reserved for Eastern Orthodox Christians or Roman Catholics. We do not typically see Presbyterian churches named Ascension Presbyterian Church, though we may have seen signs hailing us to enter Ascension of



Anita Dufalla

Our Lord Catholic School or the Orthodox Cathedral of the Ascension. It may take us by surprise, therefore, to discover how important the doctrine of the Ascension was to John Calvin.

References to the Ascension are found in many places throughout the New Testament.\* Although Christ’s Ascension must be interpreted through the theological lenses provided by these many texts, the primary text that describes the Ascension is found in Acts 1:1–11. In this text Jesus appears to the disciples and speaks to them about the Kingdom of God (1:3). He instructs them to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, who will make them

\* Most notably in Luke 24:50–53; Mark 16:9–20; John 3:13, 6:62–63; 20:17; Romans 8:34; Philippians 2:6–9; Colossians 3:1; Ephesians 4:7–10; Hebrews 1:3, 2:9, 4:14–16, 12:2; 1 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 3:22, Revelation 5:6, 13.

into witnesses “to the end of the earth.” After this “Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

The Ascension of Jesus Christ was deemed so important by our ancient forebears in the faith that they made it a part of the earliest Christian creeds. Early Christians saw the Ascension as a promise of great things to come for all believers. According to Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, the Ascension is a guarantee that we will all find resurrection eventually in Christ.

### Three benefits

The Ascension of Jesus Christ marked the end of Christ’s earthly existence and the beginning of a new period of time, one in which Christ’s relationship with the Church is not restricted by the boundaries of time and space. Christ is now

available to all people all of the time through the work of the Holy Spirit.

According to Calvin, we can appropriate three “benefits” of Christ’s Ascension for our faith:

- Through Ascension-faith we experience Christ “transfusing us with his power.” Calvin envisions Jesus as high and lifted up, seated at the right hand of God, where he “lavishes spiritual riches” upon “his own people.”

- Ascension-faith experiences Christ as a “constant advocate and intercessor” who “prepares a way and access for us to the Father’s throne.” Through the eyes of his own faith, Calvin imagines Christ as a kind of holy distraction for God who “turns the Father’s eyes to his own righteousness to avert his gaze from our sins.” He sees Christ persuading the Father’s heart to look with favor on us so that we do not have to dread our own eventual entrance into the heavenly throne room.

- Most important, Ascension-faith discovers that Christ’s Ascension “has opened the way into the Heavenly Kingdom, which had been closed through Adam.” The Ascension is nothing short of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, a new age in which faithful Christians find that they have access, through Christ, to God’s ultimate reality and purposes.

### Pulled into the heart of God

In his most striking commentary on the Ascension Calvin says: “Since (Christ) entered heaven *in our flesh*, as if in our name, it follows, as the apostle says, that *in a sense we already sit with God in the heavenly places in him* (Christ). At the Ascension, our humanity, our “flesh,” has been “taken” (Acts 1:11) by God’s Beloved One into the very heart of God. This is profound good news for us as Christians and for our whole world. It means that we are more deeply valued, loved and held by God than we may have known before.

We grow and change. We move from one place to another. We endure disease and violence. We live with the sometimes painful rhythm of suffering and death. We make mistakes and we commit sins, knowingly and unknowingly. But through it all, we carry with us a vision of our humanity being taken up by Christ into God, caught up within an



## Ascension Day

### Early writings

ultimate, redemptive purpose for our lives.

This ascension of Jesus Christ is good news for us as Christians, and through us, for our world. It means that God loves, values, holds, and will transform our fragile and broken humanity in Christ. It means that, at the Ascension, Jesus took all of human life, which he cared for so deeply, and brought it "into the heavenly places," into the very heart of God. This includes the suffering refugee, the abused child or spouse, the victim of war or terror, the lonely one in the nursing home, the one who struggles with depression or a lost sense of worth and value, those who are sick, all who are in difficult transitions in life.

All of human life, at the Ascension, moves even more emphatically to God's side! All, in Christ, are moving, sometimes with sparks flying, more deeply into God's being and becoming. In Christ's Ascension we have a vision of humanity in all of its depth and breath being taken up into, being pulled toward, the heart of God in Christ.

### Homecoming

At the end of the Ascension story in Acts the disciples receive a promise by two men in white robes that there will be a homecoming. This humanity that has been "taken up" to the right hand of God somehow returns to us in glory. This is grand, poetic language. We can take this to mean that while in Christ's Ascension the world as we know it is constantly ending, in Christ's Ascension also the world as God knows it is constantly coming.

Justice and compassion are rolling down. The redemption of God is coming and will fill the earth. When all is said and done, Luke's story of

**T**he Apostles' Creed says: "On the third day (Jesus) arose from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty."

Tertullian wrote: "(Christ) received from us the earnest of the flesh, and has carried it with Him into heaven as a pledge of that complete entirety which is one day to be restored to it. Be not disquieted, O flesh and blood, with any care; in Christ you have acquired both heaven and the kingdom of God" (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh*).

And John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, asserted that "Christ left us in such a way that his presence might be more useful to us—a presence that had been confined in a humble abode of flesh so long as he sojourned on earth. . . . As his body was raised up above all the heavens, so his power and energy were diffused and spread beyond all the bounds of heaven and earth."

the Ascension tells us that Christ's home-leaving, and our home-leaving in Christ at baptism, leads finally to a homecoming—for us as the church, and for everyone—the homecoming of all humanity to fullness of life in Christ.

We have much to celebrate on Ascension Day. We celebrate the new spiritual power that is being "lavished" upon us every day. We celebrate that we have an intercessor and advocate persuading God to look with favor upon us and to pardon our sins. We celebrate that the doors of heaven are now open and that Christ has paved a way for us into the very throne room of God.

Finally, we celebrate that we are, in a sense, already seated with God in the heavenly places with Christ. And that, in spite of our suffering and sinfulness, we are,

in all of our humanity, held and valued and loved by God, in and through Jesus Christ.

It is very appropriate that we celebrate the Lord's Supper on Ascension Day. For Ascension Christians, the Lord's Supper is, among other things, a sharing in the body and blood of the Ascended One. For us the bread truly is the "body of Christ, the *bread of heaven*." When we partake of that bread of heaven we claim the reality that our own very human lives, our "clay pot" ministries, and the fragile world in which we live, have been "taken up," at Christ's Ascension, and they are held and sustained and given ultimate redemptive value by God.

Good news indeed! □

*John S. McClure is professor of homiletics and worship and Henry M. Edmonds Professor of Ministry at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.*