There is a tendency that goes back to at least the Renaissance which posits that the people who came before our own day and age were rubes, halfwits, and simpletons. It has sort of reached a feverish pace in our day and age with many convinced that those who believe what was readily embraced last Thursday to be hopelessly outdated. I have my doubts that we are evolving so rapidly (or at all), but I bring this up not to disparage us modern folk but rather to ponder the human characteristics of wonder and awe. Which I assume is where you thought I was going with this. But hopefully it will all make sense when we are done.

Today is the Ascension, which is one of the Christian holidays whose name pretty much tells you what it is all about, unlike Whitsunday (which comes next week). On this day we remember Jesus’ ascension into heaven and fortunately, just in case we can’t remember what it is about, our reading from Acts informs us that, “When [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” This story tells us of something miraculous because ascending bodily tends to defy the laws of physics. Miraculous events are generally defined as phenomena that are outside the normal and expected behaviors of things on earth which violate natural and scientific laws. And because of this, miracles are something, in our day and age, that are either discounted or dismissed, because we modern folk know how things really work. In other words, the rubes and simpletons who lived years ago may have believed that things like the Ascension actually happened, but in our day and age we know that people do not lift up off the ground and go into heaven. We know people stick to the earth because F is equal to the gravitational constant multiplied by the product of the masses and divided by the square of the distance. But here is a thought experiment: What if all those people who came before us were also in possession of such knowledge. Maybe not Newton’s law of universal gravitation specifically but what if a sixth century cooper was also aware of the fact that under ordinary circumstances people did not lift off the ground and ascend into heaven? And if this were the case, why is it then more likely that people from previous times were willing to entertain the idea of the miraculous than those in our own day and age? Why were they more willing to believe that God could step in and do something that was different from what they experienced in the day to day? I don’t know that we can answer this question with any degree of certainty without conducting a séance, but there is a related question that I do think we can answer or at least contemplate. And that question is this: If those who came before us were more willing to believe in the miraculous, were they opening themselves up a fuller or more complete life -- not just spiritually but in all aspects? Now before I go on, I should say what I am not doing. I am not advocating that we dislodge the modern order and go back to sacrificing virgins, so we have an ample grain harvest, but simply want to examine if the refusal of much of modernity to be comfortable with the unexplainable and miraculous costs us something.

Auggie, Amy and I were discussing art the other day and saying that one of the problems with much of modern art is that it is explainable. That is, a fair amount of modern art tends to have a very defined and narrow meaning. A work might be a statement about the working conditions of day laborers in central Oaxaca or the oppression generated by the patriarchy in Düsseldorf. Now if you are concerned with such things, I am not disparaging them, I am just not sure if something qualifies as art if its meaning can be expressed with equal certitude on a three by five card. Part of art’s value is the expression of things that cannot be expressed through language. It is very hard to say exactly what Monet’s *Water Lilies* or Mahler’s *Fifth Symphony* mean. But they mean something. They mean something that is beyond the grasp of our language, something we may, rather vaguely, define as beauty. Similarly, with miracles they touch on something that speaks to us in ways the ordinary cannot. If Jesus had simply left a note saying that he had gone to be with the Father, it would have relayed the same message, but it would have been less spectacular and much different than the physical ascension into heaven. To my mind, in trying to connect with God, we need a little bit of the miraculous to remind us of God’s nature, to remind of us of just how beyond the day-to-day God can be.

One of the great issues for religion in general is that we try to make the divine too ordinary. If you look at the gods of the Greeks and Romans, they were mainly just immortal capricious humans – they wanted to open boxes that they shouldn’t, get back at their cheating husbands and get really drunk; all the stuff people do in country music songs. They were more or less like you and me but would do ordinary things on a much larger scale. And at various times and places in Christianity there has been a similar push. It usually takes the form of making Jesus more human to the exclusion of his divinity. Whether this was the Arians in the fourth century making Jesus not co-equal with God or Thomas Jefferson taking his pen knife to the New Testament and removing all the miracles. Humans don’t like mystery and try to solve the problems that mysteries present through rather pathetic means. But miracles in general and the Ascension specifically do not lend themselves to simple explanations that tie up all the loose ends, which leaves us with two options. We can either be comfortable with not knowing or we can do some creative editing and say that miracles really do not happen. That they were just the invention of some people from a less sophisticated time. But when we do that, we end up with a God who doesn’t look all that different from us. Maybe you are more interesting than me, but I find the prospect of worshiping myself to be extremely boring. I mean I am currently having trouble figuring out why the windshield wiper fluid in my car won’t squirt out like it is supposed to – not really something you would want in a god.

The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that many if not most philosophical problems came down to problems with our language. I don’t want to go to deep into his arguments partly because he can be a bit confusing. Rather, what I want to point out is what I think he recognized and that is our natural human limitations. We cannot and will never be able to explain everything. The miracle of the Ascension is just one such thing. We cannot satisfactorily explain it, so we are left needing to acknowledge our limitations. But the beautiful thing is that when we acknowledge our limitations, the story does not end there. Something new and different can take over. Just as music or paintings touch something that ordinary language cannot express, wonder and awe can step in when we are left not quite understanding. And this is not a bad thing, in fact wonder and awe are things that connect us with God on a different level, at the place of mystery. And it is in mystery where we see beauty that is God. John Keats poem *Ode to a Grecian Urn* ends with this rather famous line, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Today we remember Jesus’ ascent into heaven. It has lots of theological implications, but let’s stand back from those for a minute and just marvel at the beauty and wonder of it all; plunging into the mystery that is God so what we may be his own this day and forevermore.