In many ways I think of this Sunday, that is the Sunday of Easter VII, in the same way I think of season six of *Bewitched*. If you remember this was the season when Dick Sargent replaced Dick York in the role of Darrin and we were just supposed to act like nothing happened – York, Sargent, po-tay-to, po-tah-to. Well today we don’t have new actor playing St. Luke or anything like that but in a similar way we are supposed to act like the Ascension never happened this past Thursday. For you Lutherans out there Ascension is what we English-speaking people call *Christi Himmelfahrt*. So to recap, last Sunday Jesus talked about needing to go away so that the Father could send the Holy Spirit. It was a perfect set-up for the Ascension, but today our Gospel has Jesus hanging around, talking about loving the disciples. Not a bad message, but as you know these events happened before the events we had last week, so it’s really weird. For some reason the people who put the lectionary together must have gotten their notecards out of order. I mean since Easter we have been building towards the Ascension and today we say never mind, let’s forget about that narrative arc.

In response to this slight I am going to stand athwart history and have us to get in the WABAC machine and contemplate the Ascension for a moment. The readings on Ascension are from the opening of Acts where we read, “[Jesus said] ‘you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."

So if you would like a little trivia this is not the only ascension in the Bible, there is another (well actually two if you count the one in the book of Enoch, but only the Ethiopians seem to do that). The first ascension comes in 2nd Kings where we read, “As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.” But back to today’s ascension and the question of what are we to make of Jesus rises bodily into heaven? First off, there is the somewhat obvious theological point and this has to do with finishing up the resurrection story. In the *Interpreters Bible Commentary* they say it this way, “Jesus’ ascension further validates his resurrection and vindicates the claim that he is God’s Messiah. Unlike others who are resuscitated to life (e.g., Lazarus), Jesus is brought back to life never again to die.” In other words Jesus was not just given CPR and would one day die again like any other human being, but he was truly risen and would never die again. His body would never be corrupted. This also means that through belief in him we will also one day have a resurrected uncorrupted body.

So I assume that kind of makes sense. But what of the actual business of Jesus being lifted up out of their sight? Is this something we modern sorts of people are supposed to believe? Are we supposed to believe that it really happened like Luke tells us or is it all symbolic, or possibly even the result of some over active imaginations?

To say that the Ascension did not really happen as described in the Acts of the Apostles is a fairly prevalent position these days, even among certain Christians. And it is not just the Ascension, but any Biblical story that contains elements of the supernatural; and the reason for this unbelief has to do with science. Since the scientific revolution a view has emerged that only things which can be tested and repeated are seen as true, whereas things that cannot, are seen as false. So, for example, the Resurrection is said not to have occurred because resurrections have never occurred in the lab. And similarly with the Ascension, we can write it off because we know that as a general principle people do not float up into the clouds. But is it that simple? Is our faith subservient to the scientific method? Let’s set aside the Ascension for just a moment and answer this question more generally. Does everything we believe have to be validated scientifically? As you have probably guessed, if you have heard me preach for a while my answer is no, because while having no issues with the scientific method, I do not believe that it represents the theory of everything, because there are things that cannot be seen through the lenses that science gives us. Now before I go on I need to make a clarification: When I say science is inadequate in explaining something it does not mean that I am rejecting science, I am only pointing out that it has its place and that place is not everywhere. I want science to help design an airplane, but not to tell me a joke or write me a sonnet.

I was recently listening to an interview with the English philosopher Roger Scruton on human nature and whether humanity can be entirely explained through material means like biology or evolution. That is do firing neurons and opposable thumbs explain everything about us, or are there things in human nature that require another type of explanation? Scruton argued that scientific explanations only go so far and to justify this answer he pointed to music. He said if you take a piece of music like Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos, science can tell you the pitch of the notes, the speed and volume at which they are played and many other things, but it cannot tell you why it is beautiful. His argument more or less is that science is good and useful for very many things, but it does not explain everything and in fact can be comically inept when it tries to explain things like beauty or transcendence. And I think it is very important for our discussion about belief and the fact that God does sometimes inhabit the realm of the miraculous. That God exists in places where science and material explanations are woefully inadequate.

Okay, so back to the Ascension and why it is important not just for wrapping up the resurrection narrative. There needs to be something unknowable about God, there needs to be something “other” about God. If we make God something that we can completely understand then we might as well replace God with a second grade math book. There needs to be something about God that inspires awe and wonder and on some level be unknowable. If I asked you to explain why you love your spouse or child, I am sure you could come up with some things, maybe their sense of humor or how they smile, but there is ultimately something unexplainable. You love them because you love them. And all of the explanations will ultimately not explain that thing that you just know. There is some sort of connection and understanding that cannot quite be articulated or necessarily justified. Such realities as this tell us that there is something beyond what our intellects can satisfactorily explain.

The Ascension quite literally calls us to something higher, to look up to God. I know I am dabbling a little heavy in philosophy today but let me give one more quick example. The philosopher Plato had something known as the *Theory of the Forms*. Briefly stated it posits that there exists the perfect form of everything and all things on earth are just imperfect imitations of that perfect form. So there is the perfect form of a church pew and our church pews are just imitations of that, which should probably come as no surprise. But I think God as reveled to us in the Ascension today is like this. A God whom we stand in awe of, not fully understanding or comprehending, but wanting to reach up to. Our God is aspirational and partly beyond understanding. And with our limited knowledge we are trying to imitate the perfection that is found only in him. Yes, we do it imperfectly, but that is the nature of worshiping the perfect. If we take away all the miraculous we are left gazing into our navel instead of lifting our gaze heavenward towards God loving and worshiping him this day and forevermore.