

**Hadleigh, 8.00 a.m. 8/4/16, 7th. Sun. of Easter (Sun. after Ascen.) Acts
16.16-34, John 17.20-end**

1. Toward the end of the 16th. Century calculations showed that the sun could not go round the earth. The only conclusion these early astronomers could make was that the earth went round the sun. This was revolutionary stuff and the Church and most right thinking people of the time condemned this discovery. Galileo, who was an arrogant so-and-so, got on the wrong side of the church authorities and suffered for it when he defied them. He wrote books and publicly proclaimed this truth. Others who were of the same opinion kept their heads down below the parapet and did not suffer. Of course, in the end, the truth prevailed and an idea which had been held by human beings throughout the whole of human history up to that time was eventually demolished. We do not question it today, although if you stop to think, it doesn't seem as though the earth is whizzing along through space round the sun at a great rate of knots and we still talk about the sun moving'!
2. Last Thursday we celebrated the Ascension and the story quite clearly belongs to an understanding of the universe which has long since ceased to exist where heaven is just above earth. In Genesis 28 we read about Jacob having a dream in which a ladder is set up between earth and heaven. In Revelation 4, John sees a door in heaven open and he goes through it. When Stephen is martyred, he sees heaven open – a sort of crack in the sky. We know he couldn't have done – it was all in the mind - but he believed that he did and that's what really matters. Today it's common to regard the story of the Ascension as 'picture language'. If you had asked anybody in the first century – or the early Christian centuries – how Jesus got to heaven they would all have had in their minds something like the story of the Ascension. Now our non-Christian friends, and even more so our enemies will laugh at us if we insist on taking the story literally – another nail in the coffin of Christianity. While it's true that Luke is the only writer to depict a literal Ascension, the epistles and above all, the book of Revelation show Christ in heaven. The story of the Ascension fits in with their view of the universe and how Jesus got there. The danger is that' now we realise just how different the universe is, we dismiss the story, instead of asking why people like Luke told it. Had we been alive then, it would have made perfect sense to us. So what does it signify to us today, and especially on this Sunday after the Ascension while we wait to celebrate Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit– a time line which we owe to Luke.
3. (i) **Victory** : Western Christianity in the Middle Ages regarded the crucifixion as the big victory – and it certainly was - but the Eastern church has reminded us that we cannot divorce the crucifixion from the resurrection and the Ascension. So The Ascension is all part of Christ's victory – and how important that victory is. As Paul puts it in 1 Cor.: 'Thanks be to God who gives **us** the victory' (I Cor. 15.57). It means that we can have faith that ultimately goodness and love will prevail

and all the forces of evil will not. So we are members of a victorious community.

4. (ii) **Lord of heaven and earth:** Paul draws this out in his later letters: 'He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things invisible and invisible, .. all things have been created through him and for him' (Col.15-18) and the same thought is expressed in that well-known first chapter of John's Gospel: 'All things came into being through him' (John 1.3). Today we realise the universe is so much bigger than used to be thought, but that does not affect our understanding of Christ in this cosmic sense.
5. (iii) **The waiting Sunday:** The early church was very conscious of the power of the Holy Spirit. The story about the earthquake from Acts this morning does not specifically mention the Holy Spirit, but we can be sure the Paul and Silas were inspired by the Holy spirit to sing Christian songs while in prison, and that the jailer was moved by the Holy Spirit to respond. The point is made more overtly in other stories in Acts – like the story of the centurion, Cornelius, when Peter was taken to him to talk about Jesus. As Peter was speaking we read: 'the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word' (Acts 10.44). We can also be sure that the Holy Spirit was working in their hearts in the first place to send for Peter. The point is that Jesus could only be in one place at one time, but the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, could be everywhere. In John's Gospel, the risen Jesus breathes on his disciples and says: 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (John 20.22). When we read this and think about it' as we shall next Sunday, we need to remember the significance of breath. Whereas for us the sign of life is the beating of the heart (American Vice-President only a heart beat away from being President), for the Ancients it was breath. If you stopped breathing, you were dead, and for the them the first breath and the last breath were when life began and life ended.
6. So today, the waiting Sunday, we look for the coming of the Holy Spirit. As we do this and reflect that Jesus said he would lead us into all truth, we might reflect that this includes our knowledge of the universe. We should also reflect that next Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, is the beginning of Christian Aid week and that the Holy Spirit has led us to care for the needy and the disadvantaged.

