We're celebrating the Ascension of Jesus today, even though we are a few days late. Technically, the Feast of the Ascension took place this past Thursday, May 9, 2013. Ascension Day marks the 40th day after Easter, the day on which Jesus was taken up into heaven following his resurrection.

In some countries – like Germany – the day is celebrated as a national holiday. In some Christian traditions, special services are held on the day, including grand processions, what are dubbed “church crawls” in some communities where people visit each other’s churches, and concerts, at which are sung some of the special music written specifically for Ascension Day. In still other Christian traditions, the day passes without much notice.

I doubt that many of us have memories of Ascension Day celebrations from our childhood and youth. I cannot remember one in my own upbringing. If the story of the Ascension was read, it was not the text of choice for the morning.

In seminary, we were taking the Standard Ordination Examinations – tests which must be taken and passed to be ordained as a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Our theology examination included an essay question in which we were instructed to discuss the “Doctrine of the Ascension” and its meaning for the church today. A quiet terror filled the room as the answers were contemplated and formulated. Truth be told, there is no doctrine of the ascension, which, when called to the test writers attention, caused the question to be thrown out.

But here we are. We’re marking the Ascension of the Lord on this Sunday, when most churches in town will be celebrating Mother’s Day. After grappling with the Ascension throughout the past week, I was willing to throw in the towel and write a happy little Mother’s Day piece of fluff and maybe even sing a verse or two of “Mother McCree.”
But I couldn’t do it. What I relearned this past week convinced me that it is very important that we spend some time with the Ascension and what it might mean for us today. And since I’ve already passed my ordination examinations, I can’t submit this for approval to anyone but you. So, here we go.

The first question we need to face is: “why even bother with the Ascension?” It’s not all that big an event. It doesn’t make it into all of the gospels. Most of us, if asked, wouldn’t name the Ascension as one of the most important days in the church year.

The problem is that it does appear in the Bible — specifically in Matthew and Luke and Acts. There are accounts of Jesus’ ascension that cannot be ignored. So, to answer the question, we have no choice but to consider those stories and what they are saying.

But, as soon as we turn to the biblical accounts, we run into a problem. The accounts don’t agree. In the story from Acts that we read at the beginning of the service, we heard again these words:

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

The event took place on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city of Jerusalem, near the town of Bethany. A church marks the supposed spot to this day. And so, we sort of read the story with a “literal lean.” There’s a when, and a where, and a who, and a how — so it must have taken place just as the Bible says. Case closed.

Not so fast. When you read Luke’s gospel – the first of the two-volume set – the Ascension happens on Easter evening – not some forty days later. At the end of that first Easter day, according to Luke:

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

According to Luke’s gospel, the Ascension happened on Easter evening.

So, what are we to make of the fact that Luke tells the same story twice, but separates the two stories by forty days? It might be clumsy editing. Maybe Luke forgot that he had already told the story and set it on a different day. Maybe Jesus ascended twice – but I doubt it.
That means that we may be left to look for something more. Maybe there is more to the story of the Ascension than can be contained on a literal page and held in a literal interpretation. And it is to that “more” that we now turn.

An image that I like to use for reading the Bible is that of an iceberg. The part you can see on the surface is impressive. But what exists beneath the surface is amazing and dwarfs that which can be easily seen.

The first thing we need to remember is that Jesus—the flesh-and-blood, historical person—is no longer here. After the resurrection, Jesus was gone. But the Ascension tells us the deeper lesson that Jesus is with God and just as God is everywhere, so too is Jesus everywhere. No longer constrained by the limitations of time and space, Jesus can now be experienced—known and understood and followed—anywhere and anytime.

It is the message that Matthew gives us in his gospel. As Matthew tells the story:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

Matthew is subtly telling us a most important lesson: all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus. If Jesus has “all authority,” then those who claim to have authority are mistaken and just plain wrong. Caesar—in whatever guise he may be known—does not have true authority. Money and possessions—in great quantities or in profound absence—do not have true authority. Contacts and connections—no matter who you know—do not have true authority.

The ascension of Jesus means that Jesus is Lord—and the lordship of Jesus means the lordship of God. Jesus, vindicated, raised, and ascended—has taken God’s message of love, justice, unity, and peace to a world that is far too often marked by domination, injustice, oppression, and violence. The ascension of Jesus means that God’s vision for the world will triumph over all human dreams of wealth and power.

And, finally, the Ascension of Jesus reminds us of Jesus’ presence. For you and me and for all Christian disciples, Jesus lives on in our lives and experience. We know Jesus, not just as a person of the past. We experience Jesus alive and present in our lives and in our world today. As much as the resurrection affirmed Jesus as Lord, the Ascension does exactly the same thing.
That's a lot. For a day that we are not all that sure about celebrating, there’s a lot there that calls for a celebration. The Ascension of the Lord is an important day in the church’s year.

Oh, and there’s one more thing. The Ascension serves as a bridge to the Day of Pentecost. Next Sunday we celebrate the gifting of the Holy Spirit to the church. The abiding presence of God is with us still.

I remember seeing a cartoon that struck me as odd and even untrue. It was a cartoon depicting the Garden Tomb of Jesus and, hanging on the stone, was a little sign that said, “Gone…But Not Forgotten.” It was intended – I hope – as a playful little Easter chuckle. But the more the thing preyed on my mind, the more I began thinking about the message.

Yes, the historic, human person of Jesus of Nazareth is gone. He is no more. Like all mortals, he has passed from time to eternity.

But, the resurrection and the ascension tell us much more. Not only is he not forgotten, he is experienced as alive and present to this very day and moment. “I will be with you always,” he said and it is true.

Our God is not gone. Our God has not abandoned us. Our God is with us always. Our God is ever-present, ever-caring, ever-loving. Our God has triumphed over sin and death. The Kingdom of our God will be established and grow until the earth is what God intended it to be.

What’s the most important word in the Bible? Emmanuel. That is, God with us. And so God is. For now and evermore. Amen.