

JESUS ASCENDED INTO...?

Acts 1:6-11a

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When I think of the Ascension,

I think of a family vacation we took when I was 14.

We all loaded up in the station wagon and went to the Black Hills
in South Dakota—where Mount Rushmore is, with the

Presidents' faces—

and we went to a Passion Play in an outdoor
amphitheater in the little town of
Spear-fish, South Dakota.

It was community theater—there were no professional actors or crew—

it was just something this small town did to

attract tourists and make a little money for their town.

They had a couple of camels and three sheep on stage
for the Palm Sunday parade,

and then the actors went through the Last Supper,
the Crucifixion and the Empty Tomb.

Then the whole play ended with the
Ascension scene, right there on stage.

To make the Ascension Scene work,

they had a block and tackle,

a system of ropes and pulleys for hoisting a heavy load.

You put a weight on your end that's equal to
the weight you're lifting,

and then, when you pull on the rope,
it is easy to lift that load.

So for the final Ascension scene,
they had some wires attached to Jesus that
you couldn't see from a distance,
and the wires were attached to a rope that
went up over a beam above the stage
and then down behind the backdrop to the stage crew.
But, at this particular performance,
the actor who usually played Jesus was sick,
so a stand-in actor took his place.
But the stage crew forgot that
the stand-in Jesus was 20 pounds lighter
than the regular Jesus.

So when Jesus raised his hands to Ascend into heaven,
the stage crew guy pulled on the rope,
but the stand-in was so much lighter that
Jesus whooshed up in the air and got
knocked out on the beam above the stage.

The stage crew guy was so freaked out that
he let go of the rope and Jesus
plopped back down to earth in a pile on the floor.
(I should tell you that when
the curtain went up for the actors to take a bow,
Jesus was there with the rest of the actors—
he had a bandage on his head—
but he was OK.)

That is one picture of the Ascension.
But Martin Luther had another.

He said that the Ascension story is
poetically saying that,
since God sits on the throne of our hearts,
when we say that Christ ascended to
sit at “the right hand of God,”
what we are saying is that
Christ ascends into our hearts.
Wow, that was 500 years ago
and it’s not fundamentalistic at all.

Whenever we talk about what our Christian
spirituality means to us,
we often end up talking a kind of theological poetry
to describe how it feels.

Because our Christian spirituality is
not a head trip. It’s a heart trip.

A few years ago, I was Program Director at Holden Village,
an ecumenical retreat center in the Cascade Mountains
on the Washington/Canadian border.

One time, all 70 priests—half women, half men—of the
Episcopal Diocese of Olympia Washington
came for a retreat.

As Program Director,
one morning I went over to the building where they were meeting
just to make sure they were doing OK.

When I walked in, they were all just sitting there,
with their eyes closed, in silence, for an hour.

So I tipped-toed out and

I went back for their afternoon session, and,
once again, they were all just sitting there, with their eyes closed,
in silence, for an hour.

It turns out that's what they did all week.

I asked them: what's up with that? They said,
"Oh, we were practicing
the Presence of God."

A few hours after the Episcopal clergy left,
a Methodist group of 400 high school youth from Seattle
came for a weekend retreat.

They brought with them a Rock'n'Roll band and
did "Praise Services" in the gymnasium
morning, noon and night.

They were so loud that when I went on a
hike one day, I could hear their music up in the mountains.
—But I think, in their own way, they, too, were
practicing the Presence of God.

Back when I was in high school,
they taught us that if something is *different*
it has to be bad.

But today I think we are learning that
we can have a silent Prayer Service,
or a loud Praise Service,
or a Eucharist Service—

or even a Service Project—

and all of those different ways are good.

—That God is present in each of those different ways,
just as God is present in each of us in different ways.

what you pray about silently during our community prayer.
—Maybe someone close to you is
struggling with a terminal illness.
Maybe you're in a personal relationship that
is having some problems.
Maybe a young friend of yours drank too
much at a graduation party and,
on her way home, got in trouble with the law.
Or maybe you are just plain lonely and
it's been going on for so long,
and you've been feeling so low,
that you came to church this morning
in the hope that you could just ascend,
with God's help, to a higher place.

I was feeling low like that several years ago
when I lived in Cleveland Ohio.

I was feeling anxiety about some things
at the church I was serving, and it had me down.
I couldn't go talk to my pastor because
I was the pastor.

And I was already talking to myself too much.

That's part of what anxiety is, I think:
talking to ourselves too much.

It wasn't a psychological problem—I didn't need a therapist.

So I decided to go to a Spiritual Director.

I went to a community of Franciscan nuns
and met with a woman named Sister Christa once a week,
just to talk about things in a spiritual way.

One day, Sister Christa said,

“I’m going to give you a homework assignment this week.”

I like school, so I was ready to write an essay,

do some research on the internet, or

read a couple books from the library.

But instead, Sister Christa said,

“I want you to go outside every day this week,

lie down on the ground, and

look up at the clouds for 15 minutes each day...

and then come back next week and

tell me what you experienced.

I was a little put off by the whole thing.

I’m a grownup, I’m a pretty smart guy,

and it seemed like a grade-school thing to do.

I hadn’t laid down on the ground and

looked up at the clouds since I was a kid.

But you know what? It solved my problem.

Because I could feel the earth beneath me,

which will never let me down,

and I could see the open sky,

which helped me to breathe and to

imagine the endless possibilities for my future.

It was an “occasion of grace,” as the Catholics say.

An occasion to remember—to feel—

that I am the same person that I was as a child.

An occasion to remember

all the dangers, toils and snares

though which I have already come.

An occasion to remember that it was
 grace that brought me safe this far
 and will be grace that leads me home.
 Lying on my back looking up at the clouds,
 I was practicing the Presence of God.

As my spirit ascended to the sky,
 I felt inner peace, which gave me both
 the freedom and the courage to
 bring my gaze back down to earth and
 meet my problems face to face.

Well. Let's end where we began,
 back at Luke's story of the Ascension in the *Book of Acts*.
 I love this story because, once again—and for the last time—
 the disciples are so dumb...they just don't get it.

On this last day with Jesus, they are still asking,
 “Now are you going to establish your kingdom on earth, Jesus,
 so that we can be your new aristocrats
 and rule over our enemies?”

 They still don't get what Jesus was about,
 as he disappears from their view.

As they are standing there gawking up at the sky,
 the same two people in dazzling robes
 whom Luke told us were at the empty tomb
 now show up again.

 At the tomb they said to the women,
 “Why do you look for what's living
 among the dead?”

Now they ask the disciples,

“Hey, Galileans, why are you looking up into that empty sky?”

The implication is clear:

bring your gaze back down to earth,

because it is here

that you will encounter the risen Christ.

And with this story, Luke now begins

the adventurous *Book of Acts*,

with all its great stories about

the actions of the Early Church,

as the disciples learn what Jesus meant when he said,

“I will no longer be in the world, but my disciples will.”

So, where did Jesus go

when he ascended?

In the United Church of Christ, we say that

Christ ascends into the Congregation—

“wherever two or three of us are gathered in Jesus’ name,

Christ is present.”

—Imagine, Christ is spiritually present

even in a congregation as small as two or three!

Our Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Episcopalian friends

would say that Jesus ascended into communion.

I think that’s a beautiful piece of theological poetry!

(But it’s not that different from us, is it?

—because communion embodies community,

which is another word for congregation.)

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Meanwhile, our Lutheran friends say that
Christ now transcends all time and space
and is *everywhere* because he ascends
into the hearts of believers, to reign there with God.

What a beautiful gift our diversity is
in the Ecumenical Church!
We all help each other to be
Jesus' disciples in the world in different ways—
even as Christ prays that “we may all be one,”
which is the motto and mission of our
United Church of Christ.

The only enemy of unity in our church
is the idea that there is only one way for members to believe.

But just as you, and I,
and the person sitting next to you
each have our own personality
and yet are part of the same church,
so also, whether you're
an Episcopalian doing silent prayer,
or a Methodist youth group
with a rock-n-roll praise band,
or a Catholic who remembers occasions of grace,
or a UCCer who follows Jesus by
working for justice through politics,
we are all part of the same family,
the one Church of Jesus Christ,
and we are known by our love.

So whether we say that Christ ascended into communion,
or into our hearts, or into our congregation
as the risen Body of Christ,
all of that theological poetry
brings our gaze back down from heaven to earth
to look at what is around us and
practice Christ's love in the world.

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