

05.13.2018

The Ascension of Our Lord

cf. Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

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Well, as many of you know, last Sunday I was away. My father-in-law, Michael, was turning 60, and he had no idea my family and I were coming to help celebrate. There we were at the restaurant, waiting for him to arrive. Finally, when the hostess seated him at the table, we were hiding behind our menus. Then, “Surprise!” Needless to say, he was shocked—we all had a lotta fun that night.

One of the things I enjoy most about my visits with Michael is our talks. We’ll have finished dinner, kids have gone down to bed, and he and I will just sit out on the back patio together with a couple drinks. Jeni accuses me of stealing her father away. So, he’ll tell these great stories—about life, work, church, family, whatever.

One of my favorites is about when he was a kid growing up in Milwaukee he always looked forward to Summerfest. If you don’t know, Summerfest is this big annual festival right on the lakefront, with lots of food vendors, tons of live music, and plenty of exciting rides. So, circa 1970, young Michael had been working all morning at his mother’s restaurant to scrape up a few bucks for Summerfest. But when he gets to the entrance, he realizes he’s short on funds. The little he’d earned that day would barely cover admission, let alone any rides or refreshments throughout the day.

Imagine how he must’ve felt. Hearing the music, smelling the aromas, seeing all the other children having such a great time—he must’ve felt so grounded, so stuck, so anchored to the spot where he was standing. He wasn’t able to go where those other children had gone, where they were having so much fun. He just didn’t have what it takes.

This story came to mind when I first read the Ascension texts for this morning. I mean, it’s been a good run—we’ve had Jesus with us for close to six months. We’ve gotten to witness His birth, His Epiphany, His Last Supper, His crucifixion, and most recently His resurrection. But now it’s time for Jesus to bid us adieu. Heaven’s calling Him home—He’s moving on to bigger and better things. Destined for greatness, it’s now time for Jesus to take His rightful place at the Father’s right hand. There, He’ll be exalted to the highest places, will rule over all things, the earth His footstool. He’s got power and glory and might just waiting for Him. So, it’s time for Jesus to be off—up, up and away He goes.

How does that make the rest of us feel though, left behind on planet earth? Where’s our ascension, our exaltation, our power and glory and might? If you’re like me, you might feel more grounded by your weaknesses, stuck in your own frailties, anchored by your limitations. He’s way up there—we’re way down here. You can almost feel the gravitational pull tugging down hard on us.

It’s unfortunate that for centuries so many Christian artists have only made things worse. For example, look at any image of Jesus enthroned—like the stained glass window at Christ Church, the cathedral at Oxford. There, high above the main altar, is a rose-window, with the exalted Christ at the center. What doesn’t help is that this separation between us and Jesus is only exacerbated by such a depiction. Stern and austere, Christ the King coldly stares straight ahead, there’s a distance in His eyes—the warmth and love in His gaze has disappeared. And instead of gentle healing hands and inviting embraces, His arms are occupied with symbols of authority and judgment. In His hands He holds an orb—representing how He’s got the world in His grip—and a scepter—like the iron one mentioned in the Bible that smashes the nations like pottery. It’s as if something about this Jesus who befriended us, suffered and died for us, and rose again all to draw us to Himself, is different now. Somehow, instead, He’s changed and has become far removed from us and our situation.

But I can’t help but find that such a depiction is less than accurate. I mean, sure our Lord’s ascended far above, is exalted in the highest places, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father in great power and glory and might. At His name every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth. And yes, He has rule and dominion over all things. But cold and austere—not our Jesus. No way, no how. He wouldn’t ascend to elevate Himself, only to leave us lowly and forsaken. That’s not the God who’s revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ—uh, uh.

No, a more accurate depiction can be found in Taizé, France. There, in the Church of the Reconciliation, you can find a stained glass window of our Lord’s Ascension. This window is blue, white, and gold. Interestingly enough, although it’s a

picture of the Ascension, Christ isn't shown rising into a cloud but is actually seated. His blue robe matches the color of the sky and the stars that encircle Him. His head stands out clearly with a golden shape of the sun behind it, filling the top of the window. At the center of the window is a balancing orb of gold. This time, the orb representing the globe isn't clutched by power-hungry hands, but is held with attentive care and gentleness. And just above it, on the blue robe at the place of Christ's heart, is the outline of none other than the cross! Ah, we come to recognize who this exalted Christ is—not just some sovereign King lording it over us, but our familiar Savior, who cross His heart and hope to die, still hugs us close to Himself.

This seems more harmonious with how the Scriptures speak of the exalted Christ. In Revelation, when all creation bows down before Him in adoration, it's not like the rose window at Christ Church. We don't find a scepter, nor an orb. What we do find is a lamb. And not just any lamb, but a lamb who was slain. It's just like today's readings—we don't hear anything about Jesus shedding His skin and leaving behind His humanity. He does not—I repeat—does *not* ascend only in spirit. Rather, this is the same Jesus we all know and love, who still bears in His body the marks of the nails, who still has a gash in His side—just like a lamb who was slain. The very flesh that died for our sins on a cross and walked out of the tomb for our sake, is now raised up to the highest possible place. Into heaven, even into God Himself, Christ has bodily elevated those of us on high who were once on low. And after realizing this, maybe for us a new picture of the Ascension is being painted this morning.

Jesus didn't go up into heaven to get away from us, like how it might feel. But Jesus goes up to bring us even closer to Him. Just think, by ascending in human form, when Jesus gets exalted, our humanity gets exalted with Him! When Jesus in human flesh sits down at the right hand of God, it's you and I who become God's right hand man! As Jesus goes back into the Godhead with all of our human weaknesses, frailties, and limitations, each one of us is assumed into the very heart of God! Just as He was destined to ascend into heaven, and be exalted on high, and have rule and authority over all things—so are us humans! Our humanity is already there with Him in the heavenly places, so that where He has gone we are sure to follow! In short, the Ascension of Our Lord isn't the end of our time with Jesus, but is only the beginning—the beginning of *our* ascension, *our* exaltation, and *our* dominion with Him.

So, still feel grounded in weakness? . . . Don't. Still stuck in frailties? . . . Don't be. Still anchored in limitations? . . . That's not you anymore. No, Christ's Ascension isn't His escape from below, but is His bringing you up above. It is the fullness of His work of salvation for you.

Instead, feel this. Heaven scooping you up in Christ to a position of power. God reaching down in Christ to elevate you to a place of glory. Christ gathering you with Him on high to rule in might. That explains then why the apostles could go away today not disappointed that Jesus has left the building, but overjoyed at the future He's gone to secure for all of us in heaven.

That must've been something like how my father-in-law Michael finally felt. Feeling grounded, stuck, anchored outside Summerfest . . . along comes his Uncle Bobby. "What's the matter?" Bobby asks young Michael. He then goes on to explain his dilemma. Enthusiastically Bobby motions, "C'mon! I'll walk you over to Summerfest." Well, as his uncle passes right by the front gate, Michael gets confused, "Hey, there's the entrance." But Bobby just keeps walking, insisting they go in a different way.

See, there was a service gate around to the side, but as they go round the corner, suddenly a security guard stands in their way. But without missing a beat, Bobby holds up his satchel and yells to the guard, "Gotta deliver the sheet music for the Ella Fitzgerald concert" (she happened to be performing later that night). And, believe it or not, the guard quickly backs down and says, "Oh, sure, sure. Okay." Then Bobby looks back and says, "This here's my nephew. He's never been back stage—but you don't mind if he comes with me, do you?" "No, 'course not. Go right on in," the guard says with a smile—can you imagine? Leading the way, Bobby turns to Michael and says, "There you go, kid. Have a ball!"

Today, this Ascension Sunday, Jesus—our great Uncle Bobby—has led the way for us. He's not leaving us, but is going on ahead to bring us with Him. For you and I who don't have what it takes on our own, Jesus finds us another way. By His death and resurrection . . . and ascension, He's opening up heaven before us, and we are being received into the very

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heart of God. And as we each gain entrance, He turns to us and says, "There you go, kid. Have a ball!" Only for Him, this isn't just an expression. But as we rule with Christ, that orb that He holds, we ourselves hold. Thanks to Him, we've also got the world in the palm of our hand.