

“Above but Not Beyond”

May 16, 2021

Scripture: Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23

This past Thursday was Ascension Day. It falls forty days after Easter every year, in line with the description I just read in Acts. It's the day the Church remembers Jesus being taken up into the heavens to sit at God's right hand until returning to put everything right. I grew up reciting the Apostles' Creed every Sunday. It's probably the first piece of theology I ever memorized, aside from “Jesus loves me, this I know.” I never gave it much thought, really. The idea of Jesus seated on the right hand of God, the Father almighty, never really left much of an impression.

I've tended to ignore Ascension Day, by and large. It always falls on a Thursday and in our denomination we've never really done much to acknowledge it. In fact, I don't think I've ever preached on Ascension in over thirty years in ministry. Part of the reason for that is the story itself sounds so strange to modern ears. The imagery of Ascension is rooted in a cosmology, a model of the universe, that we don't share. Ancient people imagined the universe as essentially two-tiered, made of heaven and earth. Surrounding the earth is a great dome whose surface we can only see from beneath where it's decorated by the constellations. Above the dome is the home of God, heaven. We can't get there from here; only Jesus in Christian tradition can move back and forth.

Of course, we know none of that's factually true. It was a shock, a mild one I assume, for some Christians when Soviet cosmonauts and American astronauts left the earth's atmosphere and found no evidence of heaven. So, because we know this, how exactly are we to understand the meaning of Jesus' Ascension? That was an actual question on an ordination exam years ago. Luckily it wasn't on my exam because I wouldn't have known how to answer it. But today, I think I do.

The description of Jesus' ascension isn't the only one in ancient literature. Another describes Romulus, the founder of Rome, ascending and descending between heaven and earth. The purpose of that description, I think, is to illustrate in a graphic way how Rome's founder continues to influence and shape Roman life and culture. I don't think it's meant to be taken literally. If you were to go to the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. and look up at the dome from the inside you would see, probably with the help of binoculars, a fresco suspended about 180 feet above the rotunda floor. It was painted by the Greek-Italian artist Constantino Brumidi in 1865. It's huge, covering an area of 4,664 square feet.

The title of the painting is The Apotheosis of Washington. It depicts George Washington ascending into the heavens, escorted by the goddesses Liberty and Victory, and himself becoming a god. There are a number of other scenes surrounding him but I think one claim being made is Washington continues to oversee the affairs of America and to influence them even in death. It's

not meant to merely reward him for his contribution; it's meant to affirm his continuing presence in the civil life of the country.

Ascension is not about where someone goes after they die or where Jesus is after his resurrection. Ascension has to do with how a particular individual lives on in the hearts and minds of the culture, a living force influencing the direction of institutions, governments and rulers. We can understand why Romulus, the founder of Rome would be depicted this way or Washington, the father of our country, but why would early Christians think of Jesus that way? What is it they're trying to say about the nature of our relationship with God as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus?

The best resource I've found to help me think about those questions is a book by Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be*. Wink explores what scripture means when it talks about Christ being above all authorities, rulers and powers, the way the writer of Ephesians does. He looks at the nature of institutions and governments and what God has in mind for them to begin with. For Wink the Powers, as he calls them, are part of God's good creation; the Powers are good. But we all know there is injustice and tyranny and exploitation in the world, so we can't deny that the Powers are fallen. Jesus' life and ministry reveal what God intends for us and for the whole creation, what God intends for the Powers. Jesus' ascension affirms that God is not through with any of us but will redeem even the fallen Powers of this world.

To say that Christ is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion," doesn't mean he is beyond them, removed from them. It means he is the standard by which these entities are measured. They are meant to reflect God's desire for creation revealed in the ministry of Christ: a ministry of healing, feeding, and restoring. Wink's argument is it makes no sense to imagine the Powers of this world only existing in conflict with God, as if God's and Christ's desire is only to overthrow them. That would mean we're meant for anarchy and chaos. We're meant for order, but order as revealed in the life of Christ.

Economic systems that value profits over human wholeness; governments that exploit their own people or allow segments of their populations to live in misery; industries that are allowed to decimate natural resources and continue poisoning the climate, these are examples of how the Powers are fallen. But they are meant for more than that. They're meant, as Wink puts it, "to serve the humanizing purposes of God." And that purpose is revealed in the ministry of Jesus where the poor are preached good news, the blind are given sight, and life is restored. Justice that brings dignity to the oppressed and an end to suffering is what God desires. The Powers must be redeemed if that desire is to be fulfilled.

And that's where we come in. Christ sitting on the right hand of God, that static image I learned as a kid, is not what Ascension is all about. It's about bringing the powers that be in our world under the reign of God. And that can happen only through us. When the angelic beings suddenly show up alongside the disciples, they chide them for standing there staring up at the sky as if all their answers were there. Instead, they call them to look around; they remind them

there's work to do. In light of Christ's Ascension, we have work to do. The voice that will call the Powers to redemption must come from us. The church is called to be Christ's body in the world, not to be in charge of everything or to dominate, but to hold the world and those who run it, the powers that be, to the standard revealed in Christ. That means we can't just go along with economic policies that are good for us but harmful for others. We can't continue to tolerate a system that allows more and more wealth to be controlled by fewer and fewer people, even though our stock portfolios keep getting fatter. We can't turn a blind eye to a criminal justice system that disproportionately incarcerates Black men and mistreats people of color. If the hope we offer the world lies in bringing rule and authority and power under the reign of Christ, then we must insist the principles of compassion and justice be practiced by governments, institutions, corporations and industries, even if it means lower profits or less efficiency.

Christ's ascension affirms that God is not through with our world and that wholeness and healing aren't just some far-off promise for the sweet by-and-by, but meant to be experienced right here and right now. It means God is still at work among us and Christ continues to influence and shape us, so that through us the world can be redeemed.

Amen