

40 Days of Wonder: Jesus Present and Absent

Today we come to the end of our series on 40 days of wonder, and what a wonder-filled 40 days it has been. We have encountered Jesus in the face of a stranger as we walked along the Emmaus Road, with many questions, and with our hearts burning. We have encountered Jesus behind locked doors where we heard him speak peace into our fears and challenge us to move into the world with the message of God's forgiveness. We have encountered a marked and wounded Jesus, a Jesus who invites us to face our tendencies to wound others and to learn to find new life amidst our own woundedness. Last week we encountered Jesus by the Sea, where we received from him the grace to make amends for those times we have denied him and where we heard his challenge to live out our discipleship by feeding and tending his sheep.

There has been so much richness to these 40 days that we can only imagine the disciples of Jesus' day might very well have hoped for another 40 or more days of these wonder-filled encounters with the risen Lord. But, just as in all the many different moments throughout scripture where 40 days (or in one case 40 years!) pass and open into a new beginning or a new stage in the journey of God's people,¹ so now will the end of these 40 days mark a new beginning for the followers of Jesus as Jesus makes good on his word that he would be going away and that they would have to carry on his mission. How would they do it without him? Would they have to do it without him? In the Gospel of John, Jesus had earlier said that he was going away, but, mysteriously, in the same breath he had also said, "I am coming to you," and in Matthew's Gospel that we heard this morning Jesus said, "I am with you always unto the very end of the age." What can that mean? How can going away from someone result in coming to

¹ Numerous examples come to mind: the forty days and nights on the ark, the forty days on Mt. Sinai, the forty years wandering in the wilderness, the forty days spent spying on the land of Canaan, Elijah's journey to Mt. Horeb with no food or water for 40 days, and finally the forty days of Jesus in the wilderness.

them? Somehow, Jesus' departure marks his absence from the world and at the same time it marks his presence, his availability in it in new and surprising ways. In many respects, Jesus' simultaneous absence and presence is the central mystery of the ascension, a mystery that we have already begun to contemplate in our scriptures for this morning and in hymn of preparation. I want to continue our reflection on this mystery this morning in three steps: first, I will begin with a brief reflection on the reasons we might typically avoid talking about the ascension or why our usual ways of talking about it might trip us up a bit. Second, I will suggest a different language for talking about the ascension that might help us avoid some of these "trip-ups." Then, third, I will offer up some of the concrete, political implications that I see arising from the ascension of Jesus.

First, why might we typically avoid talking about the ascension or why might it be hard to talk about. The feast of Christ's ascension—which happened this last Thursday and which we mark today—is, I suspect, a day in the church calendar that has not always occupied a lot of attention for more modern, "assimilated Mennonites." Many of the more liturgical traditions celebrate this feast day and notably many Old Order Mennonites mark this day with more frequency. I would be curious about Bloomingdale's own history with observing this day—how often Ascension Day was specially marked in the community's history and what kind of significance it might have held, if any.² There could be any number of historical reasons Ascension Day has been eclipsed in some modern Mennonite traditions. I wonder whether one basic reason the ascension might not be as emphasized might be because many of us likely find the story of Christ's ascension a bit of a puzzling, mystifying, and perhaps even implausible event in Jesus' story. After all, the Gospel accounts say that Jesus was there and then he was just

² See Sam Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands*, p.748fn63. Other traditions, like the Orthodox Church, do have yearly celebrations on Ascension Day thus ensuring a special recognition of this moment in the church year.

gone. He was on the mountain with his disciples, and then he went up in a cloud to heaven.

Inquiring minds might rightly ask, “Did his body just keep going up when he ascended? Where did his body go?”

That said, perhaps the bodily departure of Jesus is no less mystifying than the bodily resurrection, a miracle of new creation begun in Jesus that already stretches the bounds of our practical, earth-bound imaginations. During these last 40 days we have had our earth-bound imaginations stretched as we have wondered at the appearances of the risen Jesus. Throughout, we have noted that these were not normal get-togethers with Jesus. Jesus was with his disciples again in body, yet not in the same way as before. His body was at once the same body, marked by the wounds of his past passion. He was able to break bread and consume food as before. And yet, in these encounters Jesus’ body was also different, unbounded by physical limitations. He appeared and disappeared, it seemed, at will. He appeared as a gardener, a stranger on the road, and then as the familiar teacher and master by the Sea. He was absent and then he was present again. So, perhaps the strangeness and mystery of the story of Jesus’ ascension to heaven—what makes it so hard to talk about—is the same strangeness and mystery already witnessed in the new-creation life of the resurrection.³ Now that we have identified some of the reasons we might typically avoid talking about it or why it might be hard to talk about it, what can we do, if anything, to make sense of it in our own time and place? What language can help us express its meaning and significance?

Luke’s account says that when Jesus left, he “withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven,” a statement that has inspired all sorts of creative and interesting artistic depictions throughout Christian history, one of which you will note on your bulletin. The picture on the

³ The precise “physics” or “metaphysics” of resurrection life are ultimately, in every age, speculative matters to which we really have no recourse but our imagination on this creaturely “side” of reality.

bulletin is from a 16th century woodcut from the German artist Albrecht Dürer. On it, Jesus' feet are just barely visible at the top. You get the real sense of the upward movement of Jesus in this picture and of the enraptured looks of the disciples as they gaze upward. And it is here that we encounter yet another hurdle in talking about the ascension. While the perception that Jesus kept going "up" towards heaven might have been a perfectly logical idea for first century folks who understood the universe to be three-tiered—with the earth in the middle, the underworld below, and the realm of heaven above—for us moderns working with a different model of the universe than the gospel writers, we rightly have a hard time with that spatial image of Jesus moving "up." Few of us, I suspect, think Jesus zipped off to somewhere else in outer space like James T. Kirk or, for our younger crowd here, Buzz lightyear. So, if Jesus withdrew from the sight of the disciples, and, as some of the Gospel writers have it, "a cloud took him out of their sight," where did he go?⁴ The language given to us by scripture and the church to answer this question is that Jesus went "to heaven" and sat down "at the right hand of God." These are words and phrases whose meanings, I suspect, we also struggle with, and yet I think the word "heaven" and the phrase "the right hand of God" have the potential to draw us deeper into the mystery that I began with: the simultaneous absence of Jesus from us and presence with us.

So, let's start with the disciple's basic concern: If Jesus is going to heaven, has he left us alone? Has he "gone away" from us? In one respect, it would seem so. The body of Jesus is not available to us in the same way it was to the disciples when he walked with them during his ministry. That risen and glorified 'body,' whatever such a body looks like and whatever its properties and powers, scripture says that it has gone to heaven. Jesus is, in this respect absent or

⁴ Here it is notable that Jesus withdraws from the disciples in a cloud on top of a mountain. The cloud, throughout the Hebrew scriptures, has been a sign and a concealment of the glory of God. Jesus being covered by the cloud is, in this sense, a concealment of God's glory in the same vein of God in Exodus 40, for example.

‘far off’ from us. But—and here comes the twist—we must now ask, ‘where’ is heaven? Of course, scripture doesn’t give us license to try to locate heaven in an isolated space on a cosmic map. What scripture does give us license to do, I think, is to name as heaven **that space, time, and reality in which the unbounded God is fully present to us as creatures of God**. So, when we reach the barrier and end point of our lives, you could say, heaven is that space God makes for us creatures to share in God’s transcendent life. To put it in the slightly different words of one of my favorite theologians, “God is roomy.”⁵ But, God’s roominess is not limited to a ‘far off’ heaven only, but has from the very beginning of creation, been a roominess encompassing and seeking to enliven everything created. Heaven is not far off from our earthly sphere, then, but is rather *the very life of God, God’s reality* that is constantly encompassing and drawing created reality deeper into the divine life. So, when Jesus says that he has gone before us to heaven to prepare a place for us (John 14:2-3) in the roomy life of God, Jesus is not talking about going somewhere else in the created universe called ‘heaven,’ but is rather talking about further drawing us deeper and deeper into the divine life as we live out our days and then meet the barrier and end of our own lives. Jesus, in other words, didn’t have to ‘go’ far or ‘up, up, and away,’ to go to heaven. Entering the cloud concealing God’s glory, the risen Jesus entered fully into the divine reality, what we call “heaven,” that reality that will one day be one with earth.

If any of this makes sense, perhaps it could help us understand the paradoxes present in our hymn of preparation: “although our Lord has left us, he leaves us not alone. Ascended into heaven, he makes our earth his home.” What a perplexing turn of phrase! And yet, if heaven is that space, time, and reality in which the unbounded God is fully present to us, then there is nothing to stop Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, from being present to us from that

⁵ This is a beautifully condensed statement of a central attribute of God by the late Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson.

deeper reality that is encompassing everything and drawing everything towards itself. While I recognize that even this language stretches our earth-bound imaginations immensely, maybe, just maybe, this language can give us a way to talk about the ascension that doesn't trip us up constantly with questions of 'where' Jesus went.

But what, then, of the importance of the ascension? What is its meaning for us, concretely? The second verse of our hymn offers us a hint: "Christ is alive and present and makes us all akin; in ev'ry human being he walks the world again." Here, in this verse, we begin to see some of what I earlier suggested would be some very concrete, political implications that arise from the ascension of Jesus. While having previously been bound geographically in space and in time as a first century Jewish rabbi from Nazareth, somehow Jesus' body—his availability to us as our Lord and Master—is now unbounded, no longer limited by space and time. More notable still is that this Jesus is also unbounded by an earthly-national identity. Remember when Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews," and Jesus responded by saying, "My kingdom is not from this world" (John 18:36)? In ascending to heaven and sitting down at the right hand of God—an image meant to evoke the seat of authority and power—Jesus makes it clear that his absence means he can never be co-opted or set up as the head, judge, and ruler of an earthly kingdom that seeks to divide. Rather, Jesus stands in judgment of every human kingdom, especially those kingdoms that perpetuate sinful dividing-walls between people; whether it be a dividing-wall of national superiority, gender inequality, economic status, ability, sexuality, or otherwise. The dividing walls we set up and enshrine in our world are judged by the risen Lord who lived a life of solidarity with those excluded and cast aside. If Christ makes us all "akin" and yet we devalue and oppress so many in our world, we show that we worship and

follow another Lord than the risen and ascended Jesus. Jesus' absence as a potential worldly political ruler of an earthly kingdom teaches us this.

And yet again, Jesus' absence as a potential earthly-political ruler and his judgment of the world does not mean that he is not present in the world. As the words in our hymn put it, "in ev'ry human being he walks the world again." While I appreciate the way the hymn writer wants us to recognize Christ in everyone we meet, I also think it is important to point out some very particular ways that the risen and ascended Christ is present to the world in socially and politically significant ways. Listen to what the Dominican theologian, Herbert McCabe, says about two ways we encounter Christ in our world:

We encounter the risen Christ...in two ways, in two great signs, each a sign both of the world and of the love of God: the poor and the sacraments. The poor are primarily a sign of the sin of the world: the oppressed, the homeless, the naked, the hungry, all those who stand in need of our help, unmask our world for what it is: a world structured by sin. In these we find Christ in judgment on our world. This is the point of Matthew's vision of the judgment: if you want to see what it means for God to be in judgment on the world look at the poor; that is where Christ is judging, and judging by the standard of the love of God. Here we have a visibility of the risen Christ: the love which gives judgment for the poor. The second sign is the Church and its sacraments, in which we celebrate the coming of the Kingdom of love which contrasts with our world and into which our world is being transformed: and yet, as we saw earlier, this is a celebration that belongs intrinsically to the world of sin.⁶

McCabe wonderfully draws out how the risen Christ stands in judgment over the world *as he is present in the poor*. Christ is not Lord as he is ruling from a far-off, distant 'heaven,' but as he is the unbounded presence of God *with* the poor, addressing us and asking us to demonstrate our love for God in our love for the poor. Christ is drawing us to himself by his presence with the poor asking for food, shelter, and a drink of water. In this way the poor too stand as a sign of the kingdom of love (another name for Heaven) breaking into our world of sin. McCabe also wonderfully shows how the very life of the church with its sacraments—celebrations like the

⁶ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*, 112-113.

Lord's supper—are also a sign to the world of the Kingdom of Love—they are a special place where Jesus is made present; present in the breaking of bread, the care of the poor and the welcome of all, and in the abundant sharing in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And yet, the church in every age does not have a monopoly on Christ's presence, as it too often has presumed. The church is not superior and unstained when compared with the world, in fact, it is all too often a sign of the world of sin too. While the church is rightly called the body of Christ, that body is often dysfunctional and it often fails to live out its calling as a sign of God's love, even while eating and drinking in Christ's name (and so eating and drinking judgment against itself, cf. 1 Cor. 11:29). That Jesus stands as head of the church, 'above' us as our Lord, means that the church must always be humble and repentant, never 'triumphalistic' in its attitude to the world.

I began by noting some difficulties with talking about the ascension and tried to suggest a language about heaven and about the ascension that could help us avoid some of the usual hangups we might run into. Finally, I have suggested some ways that the ascension can be seen as having concrete implications for our lives in the world. This reflection on the ascension has, admittedly, only scratched the surface, and it has been a challenging reflection—have you found it challenging, because I have found it challenging to think through and preach on? I hope we can talk more about it in worship response to see what you have learned and what we can all learn from you. For now, however, to acknowledge that we have reached the end of these 40 days and to help us eagerly anticipate the coming promise of the father, the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, let us close with a prayer for this Ascension Day.

AMEN