

Several years ago, as I was walking along the front sidewalk of the church yard, I stopped to look up and admire our steeple. And something really interesting caught my attention: there, in the middle rung of the steeple shutters, was a tennis ball, wedged in the most incomprehensible of manners. As I stood there looking up, at first, I was kind of annoyed that I saw this tennis ball, because it being there, how was I ever gonna unsee it, and the steeple being well beyond the reach of a reasonable ladder, how would we ever remove it. But my annoyance quickly turned to admiration. Because in order for that flat tennis ball to be wedged into the steeple shutters, it would have had to of been done with great athleticism – somebody would have to be able to throw a very long way, and a very high way, and a very perfect way. And did it happen on the first try, or the fortieth try, or the hundredth try?!?

I wasn't alone in my amazement. Several moments later I was joined by Jonathan, Tim, and Jim, mouths hanging wide open, as we gazed, awestruck like a Charlie Brown chorus, upon the heavens. In case you are wondering, the tennis ball did eventually fall down a year or so later.

But it's not tennis balls nor steeples I want you to think about this morning. It's that gaze. That gaze we have when we look to the sky in an attempt to imagine the things we can't even begin to comprehend. The disciples have that gaze in this morning's text. The presence of Jesus ascends to heaven in a manner similar to Moses and Elijah – it just rises well beyond the firmament, and well beyond what the eye can see. And then poof, it's gone. This Sunday, as with next Sunday, it's very tempting, and it's very easy to attribute our gaze, and our sense of incomprehension to the mysterious, and the fantastic, and the inexplicable. Yes, yes, yes, of course, all of this awe we are feeling is because of a spirit that has no corpse, and a spirit that will be evident in fire and wind and flaming tongues as it fills a city. So much attention given to spectacular details. So much drama afforded in the pursuit of historical evidence, either to vindicate Luke's author and indeed apostolic tradition, or to once and for all prove the ineptitude, anti-intellectualism, and naivety of all those silly believers. If you think we're polarized today in a political way, we're even more polarized in a spiritual way – I'm not sure that historical truth and theological myth were ever intended to be polarized and pitted against one another, but here we are.

Well, as with other fantastic stories in Luke's gospel, the transfiguration and the resurrection among them, I don't really have an interest in litigating the truthiness or mythiness of ascension. I'm not saying it's not important – this part of the narrative offers wonderful symmetry in Luke's gospel. The act of ascension helps us to distinguish Jesus' death from other healing stories – Lazarus' life is prolonged, but it will end, and there will still be a body. Not so for Jesus. He will follow in the tradition of Moses and Elijah, who join or transition with God in unique ways. Not to mention, this text offers finality to the Easter events. And this story has striking parallels to the birth narrative – the disciples, much like Mary and the shepherds in Bethlehem, will be left in awe, and filled with a strange warmth, as they glance at the heavens. And it's hard not to notice the movement toward and away from Jerusalem. God's inertia drew Jesus, and those who loved him, back to Jerusalem, the temple and center of it all, and there God is revealed. And having been revealed, the story turns outward: Jerusalem becomes a launching pad instead of a destination.

If the ascension is historical truth, it's sure not gonna hurt my feelings – I'd welcome a God who operates in such ways, and I'll gladly eat my Reese's Pieces with ET, Elliot, and any other launch buddies. If the ascension is a theological myth – a way to express the truths and events we cannot express, I'm okay with that, too – I love a God who is somehow with me, and in me, and above me, and through me.

But again, I think, if you are paying too much attention to the way and the how of Jesus' final appearance and exit, you are missing the forest for the miracle. Or better yet, you are missing the greatest miracle for a much smaller one.

Because I don't think the disciples were gazing in awe at Jesus's ascension; I think they were awestruck by the miracle revealed in Jesus' words:

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all

nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Did you catch that? In a nutshell, what Jesus is saying, is that God, the most complicated thing in the universe, the very ruach, or loving, creating force that made the world and all that is in it, is also vested in that world. In other words, God has and God always will be invested in the lives of Israel.

Yes, the life of Jesus is a new expression of God, but it's not a new story. The very God who has shepherded Israel through the ages, has now come, manifested in the person of Jesus, to experience the created world. And having lived that experience, God's gonna share the goods with God's people.

What Jesus is saying is, "Hey, disciples, (and you and me as well!), you've got the goods. Now it's your turn to spread a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. It's your turn to do as I've done. And guess what, I've got confidence that you are going to do just that."

And I know, some of you just heard that atonement language, those traumatizing words of repentance, forgiveness, and sin. Well, Jesus isn't talking about transactions, he's talking about transformations. He's talking about a world that turns its attention away from the sordid nature of Caesar, and toward the sacred way of God. He's not talking about our individual shortcomings or infections or inadequacies, or of his desire to vaccinate us. He's talking about our corporate sin, our collective insistence and dependence (even when unintentional) upon systems of injustice, over and above the independence we can find in God's justice.

God, in the form of Jesus, experienced all of the rejection the world can hurl on a person. The hymn tells us that the dancer danced nonetheless, at the beginning, in Bethlehem, for scribes and Pharisees, on Sabbath, even when the music wasn't playing. And they whipped, and they stripped, and they hung him on high, and they disposed of him like so many others. But little did they know, when the dancer is also the dance, the dance goes on. And lo and behold, the disciples learned that the dance lived on in each of them.

That's the story, y'all, isn't it?!? As awesome as it is to be filled with the details of angel choruses singing to shepherds on cold winter nights, or teenagers lecturing learned men about scriptures, or bread and fish multiplying, or women discovering empty tombs, or divine figures turning Tide-white, or catapulting into the sky...all of that pales in comparison to the revelation of a Creator who says, "You have the ability to be just like me, and now it's your turn!"

And for me, it all comes back to gazing toward the sky. Because right now, we live in an overwhelming world: the color of one's skin determines the safety of a morning jog or walk; the biases of one's politics and media selections determine their empathy toward pandemic; pocket-sized copies of constitutions are wielded in fury, fiercely defending firearms, property, and personal wealth to the direct detriment of people, the very ones the document was written to preserve and protect; somehow workers and employees have become objects rather than people; somehow our right to dine outside and worship inside has become as essential as our right to breathe; somehow the very systems that two millennia ago chewed up and spit out the truest expression of God we've known, are still up to their antics; and somehow even knowing the Jesus story, and professing the Jesus story, and proclaiming Christ's lordship, and really, genuinely believing that we've remained authentic and true, we still find ourselves captive to the lure of Caesar's trappings, awoken to injustice, but not yet ready to do that hard work which will right it.

No I don't subscribe to a traditional theory of substitutionary atonement, whereby Jesus had to pay in blood for the sins of humanity, and that God plotted the whole thing out – I just don't see the world, or the God who created it that way. But this morning, I do hope for some form of transformative atonement, some form of restoration, some kind of God's inertia that's gonna hold us accountable for the injustice we are aware of, and make us curious about the injustice we have yet to discover. Because it's time for privileged Christians like us to stop running, walking, hash-tagging, donating discerning, dialoguing, holding-in-the-light, praying for, or engaging in so many other safe and socially-distant practices to "stand in solidarity" with Christ's broken. That's just not enough anymore. It's time for us to repent, to confess, and to live into the Lordship of Christ right now.

**Not How He Left Us, But What He Left Us to Do**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Ascension Sunday, 5-24-2020**  
**Luke 24:44-53**



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

And I think, if we're honest with ourselves, when we gaze up to the sky, and dream of such a day, it sounds almost as outlandish as a man ascending into the heavens.

But take heart. Jesus offered encouragement to the disciples, and to us as well. He said you've got the same spirit I do, and my blueprint isn't easy, but it's simple: Love God and love neighbor.

The earliest disciples listened to him. They found a sacred space, Luke calls it the Temple, I'll call it something else – they had a body believers. And gathered, that body received a powerful spirit at Pentecost. And sure enough, here was a people who found repentance, and forgiveness for sins, and life in the One who is the dance.

Well friends, we've got our own temple, a body of believers, even if we are scattered and virtual. And the liturgical calendar says next week, that the spirit is gonna formally arrive.

So how about we gaze upon the heavens, and allow ourselves to experience a miracle much bigger than ascension – God's spirit infused in each of us.

May it be so! And may it be soon!