

A Hammer that Breaks All Our Idols

For a decade now I have suffered a rare, incurable cancer in my marrow. It relapsed with a vengeance a year and a half ago. Two side effects of the chemotherapy I now ingest twice a day are high blood pressure and brain hemorrhages, which is why exactly twelve months ago a thunderclap headache so waylaid me I thought my head was going to crack apart like an egg. Convinced I was about to have a stroke, I drove myself to the emergency room.

After being pricked and prodded and overwhelmed with paperwork, I lay in an exam room and watched the arrow on the monitor hover stubbornly in the red — critical territory. And I prayed. My heart was racing and my head was pounding and my spirits were falling. And I prayed. I have no idea how much time elapsed. Eventually my whispered prayers turned to anxious breathing and both finally yielded to resignation. An ambulance arrived at the hospital and summoned attention away from me. I was all alone.

Or so I thought.

Then suddenly I heard a voice. As clear and close as Carl said *god morgon* to me an hour ago, I heard a voice say to me, “It’s going to be alright.”

“It’s going to be alright,” the voice said.

“It’s going to be alright,” said God.

“It’s going to be alright,” the LORD said to me.

From where exactly?

Above me? Beside me? In my imagination?

Such a presence is too good to be true, right?

For that matter, it is also too strange to be managed. In its sheer inconceivability, the Ascension is a hammer that shatters our every idol. Every safe, reasonable image of Jesus for which we

comfortably settle, the Ascension refuses. The Ascension will not let us make Christ Jesus small enough to comprehend.

Which is precisely how we know this text is telling us the truth.

As a friend of mine writes, “The doctrine of the Ascension does not make our lives easy to interpret. The doctrine of the Ascension makes the living of our lives *endurable*.”

Or rather, the *promise* of the Ascension makes our lives endurable.

In some ways, Christ’s ascension is an item of dogma on the slimmest of basis. Of the four Gospels, only Luke mentions it, and he does so twice. Read in isolation, the account in the Book of Acts could create the impression that Jesus spent the forty days after his resurrection on *terra firma*, but this is straightforwardly not the case. Luke tells us that the Risen Jesus encountered two disciples on their way home to Emmaus. Cleopas and the unnamed disciple did not recognize their traveling companion until “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him...” Coincident with the instant of their recognition, Luke reports, the Risen Christ “*vanished* from their sight.”

Luke does not say, “Jesus *walked off into the distance*.”

No — he *vanished* from their sight.

An odd body indeed.

Later that night, the disciples are hiding behind locked doors when at once the Risen Jesus is standing among them. He does not knock. He does not step through the door. He is simply and suddenly there.

Diane was a member of my first congregation in New Jersey. The first funeral I ever preached was for Diane’s father, who came home from work one afternoon, went down to the basement, and committed suicide. Before the police were able to reach Diane and break the news to her, Jesus came to her.

“He was standing in the kitchen, on the linoleum floor, in front of the microwave and toaster oven. I don’t know how I knew it was him, because he didn’t say anything, but I knew he wanted to comfort me for some reason. Jesus wanted to comfort me, and here I was embarrassed by all the dirty dishes in the sink.”

“How did he leave?” I asked her.

“How did he leave?” She stammered. “I don’t know. He just, you know, suddenly wasn’t there anymore.”

The Ascension is a hammer that shatters all our idols; it swings the hammer with the questions it elicits.

For example:

If the risen Jesus ascends forty days after Easter, where was he in between his appearances? He did not rent a room at the Super 8 in Jerusalem. He was not glamping in Galilee. He did not couch-surf in Samaria.

He appeared. And then he vanished from their sight.

Whatever else the Ascension means, therefore, it does not signal a change in spatial location. The risen Jesus was not exclusively located on earth during the forty days after his resurrection, just as the ascended Jesus is assuredly not now located “up there.”

Nesteron lived in Iran and belonged to an observant Muslim family, yet one day the risen Jesus appeared to her.

“What was it like?” my friend asked her.

“It wasn’t like an audible voice, but it wasn’t like a voice in my head either. It was something altogether different but altogether real.”

Unbeknownst to Nesteron, at this same time, her sister, studying in Europe, had received the gospel from a classmate and been baptized. Jesus later appeared to her sister and told her to go home and share his gospel with Nesteron and their family. When the sister arrived, Nesteron

greeted her by saying, “I know — you’re here to tell me about Jesus. I believe in him. I’ve met him.”

If not “up there,” then where?

And given that wherever — how is he also here?

Actually, the Ascension is not about a *where*.

It’s about a *when*.

The Ascension is not about space.

The Ascension is about time.

Luke uses spatial imagery to proclaim Jesus’s whither because the truth is almost impossible to conceive. Where Luke gives us a picture, the rest of the scriptures rely on the concept of time. The risen Christ in the Book of Revelation attests that he is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last.

Jesus talks about himself in terms of time!

The risen Christ, Paul writes, is the first fruit of the new creation; that is, he is the first moment of God’s promised Last Future.

The question is not, “Where is Jesus?”

The question is, “When is Jesus?”

The Father raised Jesus from the dead and immediately translated him to the first moment after the End of this old aeon. The Ascension is simply the demonstration of what was already true forty days earlier. The mystery is that God raised Jesus into the future. And the good news is that this Future is, by grace, your future.

His Easter appearances are exactly what the Gospels would have us conclude— ghostlike yet not ghostlike, embodied yet different than before. They are so because the risen Jesus comes from the Future. Resurrection translates Jesus from one point in space-time to another without interrupting the Triune life. Much like folding a piece of paper and piercing it with a pencil,

leaving two holes that permit you to pass directly from one end to the other, Christ's body can pass from one location in space-time to another without interval.

Hector was an inmate at Trenton State Maximum Security Prison where I once served as chaplain. He came to see me one hot summer day, his olive skin blanched white from fright.

“Man, no joke, Jesus Christ was just there—in my cell—last night before lights out. He told me everything I done is all forgiven. And then he told me my kids are going to be alright. Preacher, don't you get it? Everyone up in here is trying to get out, and Jesus Christ up and *broke in* to tell me I'm forgiven!”

Hector looked terrified.

But it didn't stop him from asking me to baptize him on Sunday.

A thousand years ago, Bernard of Clairvaux— he was not a Swede; he was a Frenchman, but at least I got a European in here—preached a sermon entitled “The Three comings of Christ.”

In his homily, Bernard proclaimed:

“We know that there are three comings of the LORD. The third lies between the other two. It is invisible, whilst the other two are visible. In the first coming he was seen on earth, dwelling among men...In the final coming all flesh will see the salvation of our God...In this middle coming, he comes in spirit and in power, but this intermediate coming is always hidden.”

According to Bernard— and he is simply taking Jesus at his word— what we tend to call the Second Coming will not be the arrival of a heretofore absent Christ. There is a deeply ingrained habit of mind in much of Western Christianity that reads the Ascension as a kind of pre-Copernican problem to be managed.

Jesus came.

Jesus left.

We wait.

Inevitably, on this account, the church presents the Holy Spirit as the presence of the absent Christ— an interval to be endured, a lack with which we are to cope. Thus the whole of Christian practice becomes a strategy for occasionally interrupting an otherwise chronic absence. Seldom do we notice the theology buried in this construal. Bernard— and with him, John's Gospel— insists this is simply not true. Christ's ascension into the Future does not announce a departure from us. It announces the arrival of a new and deeper mode of intimacy with us.

This is why Jesus says what he says in John's version of the Ascension story, "It is good for you that I go away."

This is not consolation. This is not a half-measured apology.

It is *good*.

It is good for you.

It is good for you that I go away.

Martin Luther pressed this same point with characteristic bluntness, "Christ ascended so that he might come nearer to us."

Not farther up and further away.

Nearer.

If he did not go, if he did not ascend, says Jesus, the Comforter would not come. But if the Comforter comes, Jesus says, then the Father and the Son will come and make their home.

Where?

"In you."

Not: they will visit you. Not: they will liven and enlighten you, grow you in grace or shower you with gifts. Not: they appear from time to time in response to sufficient spiritual effort.

The Father and the Son will make their home.

In *you*.

This too is a hammer that breaks all our idols.

The Father and the Son will make their home in you. Not in you as a figure of speech. Not in you as a way of saying God is generally disposed toward you. Not in you as in the Spirit occasionally moves through you, or that Christ accompanies you from a respectful distance.

The Father and the Son will make their home in you.

The promise of the Ascension is a hammer that shatters every domesticated version of grace we might prefer. God as helpful presence, shattered. God as moral inspiration, shattered. God as the force behind our better impulses, broken to smithereens. The claim today is not that God improves you. The claim is that the triune God, who deigned to be laid in a manger and nailed to a tree, takes up residence in the likes of you.

This is either the most important thing anyone has ever said to us.

Or it is intolerable.

According to Jesus— because Jesus has ascended, he is now more intimate with you than he was with Peter on the lake or the Samaritan woman at the well or Mary Magdalene in the garden. Mary could not cling to the risen Jesus. But because he has ascended— translated into the first moment of the new creation— the Father and the Son with their Spirit now cling to us.

Next week is Shavuot— Pentecost.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit that the disciples receive at Pentecost is not a consolation prize for the loss of Jesus. Quite the opposite, it is the fulfillment of everything the incarnation was moving toward: God not merely alongside us, but with us and within us, closer to us than we are to ourselves. Like a baby in a mother's womb— as near as breath, as necessary for survival— the presence of the Father and Son is so encompassing of us we scarcely can perceive it. Most of the time, God's presence works in our lives as the sea does for the creatures who live in it. It holds us in being. It sustains us from the inside. And we are scarcely cognizant of it even as we are wholly constituted by it.

What we ordinarily call the absence of God is quite the opposite. In nearly every case, what we name as God's absence is a different impoverishment entirely: a failure of attunement.

God's presence is real. God's presence is constant. What ebbs and flows is our awareness of him, our responsiveness to his presence with us, our willingness to live from it rather than around it. The disciplines of Christian life— prayer, the reading of the scriptures, the Eucharist, the keeping of the word— are not techniques for summoning an absent Christ.

They are practices of bringing into focus the persistently present triune God.

The Parousia we await is not the arrival of someone who has been away. It is the unveiling of a three person'd Someone who has been present all along. In the language of Emmaus, Christ will not come again so much as he will *appear*—present all along.

“The doctrine of the Ascension makes our lives endurable.”

Almost three years ago, the week of the Ascension, a former parishioner named Dalton sent me an email.

Dalton's message said:

“Jason,” he wrote, “your sermon called up a memory for me. Several years ago now, I was sitting in my parked car at the bottom of a parking garage in DC. I had grown too tired and too scared to cry anymore. Barbie's and my son was a runaway. I was a mess and miserable. We were thinking the worst but too afraid to say it to each other. But then, sitting in my car in the parking garage, Jesus came to me — I swear it. Jesus came to me and said, ‘Everything is going to be ok.’ It was like God had been in the car with me the whole time.”

Like God had been in the car with me the whole time.

Not: God arrived.

Not: God finally heard me and showed up.

Not: God broke in from somewhere else.

Like God had been there all along.

“It’s going to be alright.”

Just after the doctor pronounced the “All Clear” for me to return home, the nurse assigned to me came in to remove the electrodes from my chest and the IV from my arm.

The voice still rang in my ears.

“Say,” I said to her, “I’ve been a little out of it. Just wondering, has anyone else been in here with me?”

She looked at me like I was a sad little boy who had scraped his knee. She wiped the sweat from my forehead and said, “Honey, you’ve been all alone this whole time.”

She didn’t know it, of course. But she was absolutely wrong.

Ascension does not announce an absence. Ascension announces an accompaniment. The Ascension is not a departure from us. The Ascension is a homecoming to us. More than that, it names a stubborn refusal to leave us. Jesus has gone up into the Last Future; so that, from there, he and his Father can make their home in you.

The Ascension is a hammer that shatters all our idols, including— maybe especially— the idol of our unbelief. After all, the world tells us that it is difficult to believe God is in this broken and sinful world.

Little does the unbelieving world know that it is even harder for believers to believe that *they* are *how* God is in this world. No doubt— let’s be honest— you’re not a little incredulous that you— even *you*— are no different than Israel’s ark or Mary’s womb. If heaven is the space God makes to be available to his creatures, heaven looks like...

You.

You are a temple of the Triune God.

Don't believe it?

Believe the world instead?

Then hear me.

If you cannot feel the presence of God, or if you once felt him and do so no longer; if this homecoming sounds like a beautiful doctrine that does not belong to you, or if you fear you require much renovation and many more repairs before he would condescend to accommodations the likes of you, then listen. God is yet no further from you than his word on the lips of a preacher.

Jesus goes up not to go away.

Jesus goes up; so that, God can make his home not just in you or me but in wine and bread, water *and the word*.

That is, the *preached* word.

Therefore, hear the good news.

I am not speaking *about* God now.

I am speaking *for* God.

Whatever struggle you are carrying, no matter the suffering you are bearing.

Everything is going to be okay.

If you are anxious about how to be a follower of Christ among secular peers who see you as odd, if you worry about how to be the church in a culture inoculated against the gospel, if— like me — every day feels for you like Ash Wednesday, every day reminds you that from dust you came and to dust you shall return, then hear me.

It's going to be alright.

He has you.

Literally— he has made his home in you.

Fear not! You are not alone!

In fact, you are kind of crowded— you have a three person'd God in you!

Jesus has gone up; consequently, the Almighty is closer to you than the water was in your mother's womb. You do not have to feel it for it to be true for you. Dalton did not feel it until he did. I did not hear the voice until I did.

His homecoming is not contingent on your holiness.

His presence is not dependent on your awareness.

His abiding is not conditioned on your faith.

Like Jesus says from his cross, "It is already accomplished."

The Ascension puts the period to his announcement.

Still don't believe me?

Then come to the table.

The loaf and the cup— they are just like you; they are the gate of heaven.

God is not nowhere in this world. Indeed God has made it impossible for you to believe he is not in this broken world. He is so in the bread that is his broken body and the wine that is his shed blood. The loaf and cup are hammers that shatter all our idols.

Come to the table.

Take and eat.

The God who is three persons gets inside you in more ways than one.

The Ascension does not make our lives easy to interpret.

But the ascended LORD has made his home in you.

And that makes the living of them endurable.