

“YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES . . .”

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

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Often, when I'm supposed to be working on something but I'm not quite ready to get seriously into it, I go to the internet. It is the perfect vehicle for procrastination. Earlier this week, for example, I knew I was going to be preaching this morning about Jesus' ascension, even though Ascension Day is not officially until next Thursday. Now, a lot of protestant churches don't celebrate the Feast of the Ascension at all, but in the early days of the church, and still in some traditions, it is one of those moments of demarcation in the life of the church that ranks in theological importance right up there with Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. It is the day we celebrate Jesus' final movement away from life on earth to life at the right hand of God. And if you find yourself asking yourself what that means and why it is important, then you can go to Google or your search engine of choice, type in Ascension Day, and prepare to be overwhelmed by 5,070,000 entries.

I didn't get beyond the first 20 when I got to one labeled "Ascension Art," clicked on it, and had a choice of 6,243 paintings, frescos, sculptures, and other art forms that gave visual interpretation to this holy day. I looked at image after image. It didn't take long to realize that there is one general pattern to how the Ascension is portrayed. One sees a sky full of clouds, one of which glows luminously; and out of the bottom of that cloud, sometimes you are given to see the hem of a white robe, but more often than not, just a pair of feet dangling, the marks of the crucifixion nails still visible in them. On the ground, there is a small knot of people gazing upwards, sometimes in holy rapture, other times in sorrow, often in an expression of terror, and my favorite— a folk art piece from Central America— has the crowd of disciples smiling and waving good-bye, like they were seeing Jesus off at the airport or train station. So that's the image I have held in my mind these past few days: a pair of large, well-traveled nail-pierced feet dangling from a cloud while those below merrily speed their beloved on his way.

Theology, like art, has a lot to do with imagination. The stories of scripture are intended to evoke in us curiosity, questioning, as we move about the images presented, trying to understand them from a variety of perspectives. So I ask you to bear with me, as I, theological inquirer, walk around the visual interpretation of our texts for this day: feet in the air and well-wishers below. The first thing my imagination tells me to do is to follow the feet. According to tradition, Ascension Day marks the final rising of Christ to sit at the right hand of God. Now we don't use that right hand of God image often in our tradition. I don't think I've ever given it much thought until two days ago when I found myself imagining Jesus' feet, along with the rest of him, finally arriving somewhere beyond the clouds at God's throne. There he stood, the Risen Christ in the flesh, hands and feet scarred not only by the marks of his death, but also the marks of his life. If Jesus was a carpenter, then no doubt his workman's hands wore hard calluses and scars, reminders of slipped tools and splintered boards. And those feet, the miles they had walked, over rocky ground and sandy beach, and long dusty roads. My guess is they showed their wear as well—not beautiful, certainly not perfect, but oh so human.

The church, from very early on, has insisted on a bodily resurrection and an equally embodied ascension of its Christ. Since the earliest church councils, these things have been articles of faith, holy mysteries that

point to important spiritual realities. And though our minds get rightfully tangled up in the science of this holy mystery (bodily resurrection and ascension defy reason, logic, and, well, basic credulity), if we look at the insistence on bodily ascension as pure theology, then what we are given to see is the image of the one who sits at the right hand of God, the heir, the anointed one, the one who can whisper in God's ear, and always get God's attention: that one in this realm of spirit is one who comes embodied, one who knows and cares, and has always known and cared about life in a body. And furthermore, if God cares so much about bringing the body in some form up to heaven—don't think about the logic of it, just the trajectory of the image—if God cares so much about keeping the risen Christ in his body, I believe it says something important about God's care for our lives in our bodies.

And I bring this up because there's been a lot of bad body theology in the history of the Christian church. I could tell you some of why that is historically and philosophically, but that would be a whole other sermon. Suffice it to say that many people have grown up in the church being told or more subtly being made to believe that our bodies are essentially bad, or shameful, an affront to God, the cause of our sinfulness. I would guess that even some of you here grew up in the face of such overt or implied teaching. But, in fact, the Bible insists from the very beginning of Genesis through the ascension of the Christ that our bodies are God's gift to us; they are essential to our nature. We go nowhere without them. What affects our bodies affects our whole being. They are a part of our self, our deepest personhood. Bodies are not evil; they are the deliberate form in which God made us, and therefore they are holy—holy enough, we are told this week, to ascend even to the right hand of the throne of God

So what does that mean for us in more practical terms than my highly imaginative theology so far? I think it means that the realm of the body is not only the legitimate concern of the church, it is a pressing concern of the church. It means that we should be talking in the church not only about such things as hunger, homelessness, and health care—the body problems of those out there we seek to serve—but also the more tender, more intimate topics of body theology that we all face: body-image, sexuality, aging, the things our bodies do that give us pleasure, and the places they take us that cause us to suffer. We need to think about these things theologically, to explore them in the church not from the point of view of “this is good” and “this is bad,” but what does it mean for us to love and value our embodied selves as we consider when and with whom we share ourselves sexually, or as we come to terms with our increasing inabilities as we age. I read two weeks ago in *The Oregonian* that Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon has received a major grant to design programs to address obesity in the church, and at first I thought, “Wow, that's strange,”;but the more I thought about it, the more I reconsidered. What better place to speak about, educate about such a pernicious, socially important and yet intensely personal subject? If we in the church are going to embrace such a difficult theology as bodily ascension, we should at least derive its benefit, and do better as communities of faith in exploring and articulating a body theology that celebrates the holiness of our embodied lives and helps us better to navigate its challenges.

Which takes me back to the ascension painting I was talking about earlier, all those people on the ground excitedly waving goodbye to the risen Christ as he went to be with God. I don't think they were glad to see him go; that's not the reason for their elation. More likely to me is that they knew in general terms where their Christ was going—right hand of the throne of God—and they were awed and relieved at the thought that the one who was privileged to whisper in God's ear knew first hand embodied life. The Ascension marks the formal beginning of Christ's role of intercessor, another word we don't use much

any more in our tradition. It means Christ's role as our advocate with God because he is the one who fully understands our humanity: Jesus up there at the right hand of God whispering in God's ear, "I know Mr. Thompson is cranky today, but his arthritis is acting up and it's pretty bad," or "I know that young boy just stole some food, but he has to feed his brothers and sisters, and it's hard to see those you are responsible for go hungry." Who among us is not cheered by the thought of the power and love of Jesus turned towards articulating our embodied dilemmas before A lmighty God?

One final word: it is one of the functions of art to make visible and, therefore, concrete those things that are spiritual, ephemeral, beyond understanding. Theology is that way as well. In theological terms we can talk about bodily ascension, the throne of God, the right hand of God, knowing that when we do we are making concrete that which is far from concrete in the service of making visible that which is invisible. Like the painting of dangling feet from out a cloud and enthusiastic well-wishers waving below, the theological images offered here are a mode of interpretation, valuable only if they, through the engagement of your imagination, help you see more deeply into the sacred mysteries of our faith. The Ascension speaks through the history of the church of grace, compassion, mercy, love, and the holiness of our embodied lives. May God grant that each of us finds the images that make those gifts visible in our lives and in our faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.