

“The Ascension of Christ: What It Means”

Acts 1:1-11

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I’m a real sucker for magic acts and for the past couple of years, I’ve been a fan of the program *Penn and Teller: Fool Us*. Airing on the A & E Network, it’s a show where different magicians perform their best tricks before a live audience and afterwards, the duo—Penn Gillette and his partner, Teller--try to explain how it was done for everyone. If they CAN’T, then the performer wins the opportunity to perform it again during their live Las Vegas act. Several years ago, I found myself enthralled week after week by the master illusionist Chriss Angel (who like Penn and Teller ALSO has his own show in Vegas) and his program *Mindfreak*. (As an aside, why all the great magicians always seem to end up in Las Vegas remains a mystery to me. Maybe because VEGAS ITSELF with the promise of everyone suddenly being a winner and the hope of “what goes on there STAY there” remains the GREATEST illusion of ALL in America!) But back to Chriss Angel, if you didn’t remind yourself it was all an illusion, it would blow away everything you thought you knew about reality. For instance, I watched him produce a wedding ring encased in the ice cube of a woman’s drink that was sitting before her; I’ve seen him throw a deck of cards at the windshield from the inside of a moving bus and have a pre-selected card appear on the OUTSIDE of the windshield stuck under the wiper blade; and then there was the time he walked across the top of a water-filled pool while people were swimming around him and even under him.

But the MOST amazing feats of magic I’ve ever seen him do is when he’s just walking down the street or in a park and he’ll stop and randomly ask a complete stranger if he could levitate that person. He’ll have the subject lean backwards until his or her back is almost parallel to the ground and then slowly the individual’s feet will rise up as well. Bystanders are asked to wave their hands under, over and around the subject to make sure there are no hidden strings or secret devices involved (which would seem impossible anyway since they are outside in the open air). I’ve even seen him step off the ledge of the twentieth floor of a hotel balcony and slowly descend to the atrium below to the astonishment of the crowd. And although I know he’s an illusionist and that there’s a trick to it, I’m not sure I even WANT to know how it’s done, that I’d much rather retain that sense of bewilderment which children have but then lose as they tend to get older. You see, I appreciate a bit of awe and mystery for we inhabit such a scientific and technological world that dismisses the mysterious and enigmatic in favor of logic and reason, that is always striving to provide the answers to everything!

Our New Testament text for this morning is filled with a SIMILAR sense of awe and mystery. For the forty days after Easter, Jesus has been presenting himself to his followers in a number of venues and forums, teaching them about the kingdom of God. He instructs them to remain in Jerusalem until they receive the Holy Spirit which will bind them together with the spirit and heart of CHRIST HIMSELF. At the end of this forty day period, he gathers everyone for what will be their last time together. They still think that his kingdom is to be a political one

but he rejects their assumption and tells them that if there IS any type of a timetable, only the Father knows what it is. Instead, they are to remain together and wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them which shall transform them into his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. The kingdom HE has come to institute is based on love and NOT coercion, one which will originate in people's hearts and NOT at the end of a sword.

At that, Jesus pulls a Christ Angel by being levitated up, SO high in fact that he disappears into a cloud- clouds representing a symbol of God's glory. As they stand there with their mouths wide open, two men in white robes (probably angels) suddenly appear and inquire, "Men of Galilee, why do you continue to stand there looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will return in the same way as you have seen him leave." In other words, they tell them not to waste their time looking up into the skies but rather to look about and to take note of all the immediate needs that surround them. They are not to concentrate their focus and their energies UP THERE for there's far too much work to be done! As the old saying goes, they must never become so heavenly minded that they're of no earthly good. At that, they return to Jerusalem to wait for the Spirit's outpouring as Jesus had instructed them, an event which DOES take place ten days later on the day of Pentecost.

Thirty-five years ago, I had the privilege of visiting Israel with a group of pastors. Our guide took us to the Chapel of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives where inside there is a flat rock with a set of impressions on it. We were told that tradition had it that those two depressions were actually the final footprints of Jesus as he was lifted up from that spot and taken into the heavens. Needless to say, I don't think many of us were very impressed, I think in large part because most of us really didn't know what it meant or how to make sense of it. In fact, up until a few years ago, I never gave the ascension of Christ much thought nor can I remember ever hearing a single sermon on it being preached from a Presbyterian pulpit. The APOSTLE'S CREED, however, makes sure that it is not overlooked when it says, "On the third day, he rose again from the dead. *He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*" As one New Testament scholar has written, "Ascension Day ought to be the GREATEST day of the whole Christian year, and yet few people are aware of what it means."

Insofar as I have come to understand it, the doctrine of the Ascension tells us at least THREE THINGS. FIRST, it reminds us that CHRIST HAS BEEN EXALTED AND GLORIFIED. Peter, in his great sermon on Pentecost ten days after his Lord had ascended, tells the crowd that Jesus was "exalted to the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33). Where in his RESURRECTION, Jesus was liberated from the bonds of death, now with his ASCENSION, he is restored to the close presence, power, and majesty of his Heavenly Father from whence he had originally come. To be exalted to the right hand of God thus means that he now sits in a place of authority where he serves as our advocate and mediator, ever interceding on our behalf. Where he CAME DOWN to earth from heaven in great HUMILITY to serve in great VULNERABILITY, he RETURNED to heaven in TRIUMPH and GLORY, having accomplished everything that was necessary for our salvation. As St. Paul wrote in his epistle to the Philippians, "Hence, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is

above every name.”

Therefore, the first point is that the ascension celebrates the beginning of Jesus’ lordship; it recognizes his coronation as our King. But if his ascension points to his exaltation to a position of glory and dominion at the right hand of the Father, it ALSO POINTS TO A DESTINY THAT AWAITS EACH OF US WHO ARE UNITED TO HIM BY FAITH- because our lives are hidden in Christ, as goes JESUS, so goes YOU AND ME. As Ephesians 2:6 tells us, we have not only been raised up with him but we’ve been made to sit with him in heavenly places as well. Thus, even as HE was raised from the dead and installed to a position of authority, that same promise is held out to US, TOO. One day, WE shall be raised from the dust and established on high to experience a SIMILAR glory. Consequently, we enjoy a hope that the world cannot take away from us. But before that day can come, there is yet much work for us to do; we need to keep our eyes clearly fixed on the world around us and the many needs at hand rather than looking to the skies for Christ to return and rescue us.

SECOND, the ascension of Christ does not mean that Christ is now ABSENT from us and the world; on the contrary, by leaving us, he is now in a position to send his spirit to us so that he becomes even MORE present, MORE involved in our lives and in the problems of this world than he was when he walked and talked among his followers two thousand years ago. THEN, he was close to only a small number of the disciples. In those days, his presence was localized- it was limited by time and space with only a few ever having heard his words and seen his deeds. TODAY, however, it spans the ENTIRE WORLD- he can minister to persons EVERYWHERE AND IN EVERY AGE; he is available now to EVERY sex, EVERY age group, and to EVERY race. Thus, you can call on him wherever you are, at any time of the day and night, and be assured that he hears you and will answer you. This could not have been possible unless he first left us and then returned via his spirit.

And THIRD, Jesus leaves us in order that HIS DISCIPLES MIGHT MATURE IN THEIR FAITH. It represented an end to our Lord’s visible presence on earth, but also a NEW BEGINNING, a NEW ERA for his followers. After more than three years of preparing, protecting, and caring for them, he was now saying that if they were ever going to grow up and become strong and independent in their OWN right, they would have to begin by trusting THEMSELVES, that is, by using the lessons and resources he had given them to accomplish his will for this world. He promised them in his Farewell Address that they would do even GREATER things than him because he was going to the Father. And, yet even in his absence, Christ would become MORE intimate with them than he had while he physically lived among them for THROUGH his spirit, he would reside IN them with their HEARTS now becoming his NEW HOME. Hence, Jesus would STILL be there for them- GUIDING them, ENERGIZING them, and CARING for them every step of the way. In this way, they would discover what REAL faith was- that it involved trusting his PRESENCE in his midst of ABSENCE, trusting in his NEARNESS even when he wasn’t BESIDE THEM IN THE FLESH as he had been. The fact was that WITHOUT leaving them, REAL maturity would never have taken place in their lives!

The novelist Frederick Buechner, in his book *Now and Then*, tells of the awareness that

dawned upon him when he and his wife took their two daughters to boarding school:

*I knew perfectly well that [they] were going...And for the whole summer before they left, there was all the talk about it and all the getting ready for it. And when the day finally came, Judy and I drove them there ourselves and met their roommates and lugged endless bags, boxes, and suitcases up endless flights of stairs for them and kissed them goodbye at last, knowing that in a few weeks we would be seeing them again because the school was in Massachusetts and only a couple of hours away, after all.*

*What I did not see was that even though they were only a couple of hours away, and even though there would be years of weekends and vacations for us to get together whenever we felt like it, there was a sense in which, when we kissed them good-bye that September, we kissed them good-bye for keeps. From that day forward, home, for them was theirs to find where in themselves or in the world they ever happened to find it, if they were lucky enough to find it at all.*

I assume we've all known times in our lives when we found OURSELVES alone- when the ties to home were cut and we were forced to venture forth on our own. Perhaps it was the day we first left home to join the military or when we loaded up the car to head off to college; maybe it was moving to a new community or when we learned that mom or dad or even a spouse had died. It could have been our wedding day or perhaps when our husband or wife of many years left us for another person or possibly when we got fired or laid off from what we thought had been real job security. We became anxious and wondered how we were going to make it, especially when no one was there to hold our hands or make any of the decisions for us. It was our initial foray into becoming RESPONSIBLE, SELF-RELIANT, INDEPENDENT PERSONS. And yet, with God's help, somehow we DID survive and to our great surprise we even THRIVED! We were able to discover a durability within ourselves we didn't think we possessed and hence we became much stronger, much more confident persons as a result.

One of the most determining moments of my life was when I went to my parents just prior to my junior year in college and told them that I wanted to leave the large, liberal university I had been attending in New Jersey to enroll in a small Bible college some three thousand miles away to pursue my goal of becoming a minister. My mother was aghast, "You're not going to California, and if you do, we're not going to help you pay for your education." I knew that she had said that simply because she loved me and couldn't bear the thought of my being so far from home for extended periods of time. However, to my father's credit, he said, "Dorothy, we said that he'd help put our boys through college, and if he feels that to accomplish his dreams he has to attend school out there, then we'll support him in his decision." Although my dad has been gone now for close to fifty years, nothing he ever said had made me more proud of him than those critical words of support when I most needed them.

I subsequently traveled to the West Coast which was to become my home for the next twelve years. There was, in fact, a period of five years when I never even saw a member of my immediate family. However, while there, I developed a coterie of friends who became an ALTERNATE family to me and to this day, remain my closest friends in the world. It gave me the confidence to take great risks knowing that not only was Jesus Christ with me every step

along the way but that his Church—the Body of Christ--was always present as well, ready to open its arms and welcome me in. That confidence enabled me to go to seminary and subsequently Grad School when I didn't have a nickel to my name. God responded by providing me with full-ride scholarships which enabled me to graduate almost debt-free from both. It endowed me with the confidence to accept churches nobody else wanted because I believed that with God's help I could make a difference ANYWHERE so long as I knew he was directing me. I found that I COULD make such decisions because I was convinced I was NEVER alone, that step-by-step Christ was walking alongside me and that it was all part of the same faith-building process called "Christian maturity."

For the past forty-eight years now, I think I can honestly say that my life has been securely anchored in the hands of a loving, faithful God, and that his presence in my life--with all its successes and failures, its ups and its downs--has given me the confidence to go places and take risks more CAUTIOUS persons might never THINK of doing. In the same way that the younger son in the story of the prodigal had to flee to a far country in order to find himself, I TOO had to leave the safety and security of my home and family to discover who I was and what I was capable of achieving. Similarly, those young disciples had to abandon the safety and security of their leader in order to discover what REAL faith was all about, confident that he was still guiding them, energizing them, and caring for them through it all. That is how TRUE spiritual maturity begins, for THEM and for US- learning to trust in the presence of Christ in the midst of his absence. Pure and simple, that's all faith IS- believing that through his Holy Spirit, Jesus is always with us, and trusting he will guide us every step of our life's journey right up until that day we are presented before his Heavenly Father to enjoy eternity TOGETHER. If THAT doesn't inspire us to heed the words of the New Testament scholar who wrote, "Ascension Day ought to be the GREATEST day of the whole Christian year," then NOTHING will! Let us pray...

*O God, the King of glory, who exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph into your Kingdom in heaven: Help us to trust that your Son is with us every moment of every day and that even NOW, he makes our hearts his home. Enable us to trust that wherever we go and in whatever we do that we will always have his guidance and support even if we can't see him with our eyes or hear him with our ears. We know that when we DO exercise such faith, we can undertake large risks and accomplish great things and that in the end, we shall be better and stronger Christians for it. In his name we pray. Amen.*