

## The Space Between

*Seventh Sunday after Easter/ 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021*

Last Thursday was a major feast day in the liturgical calendar of the Western Church. Although I have a feeling that many Protestants, especially those in the Reformed tradition, probably ignored it altogether. It was Ascension of the Lord. To be honest, the Ascension or Ascension Sunday wasn't part of my experience growing up as a Presbyterian in Northern New Jersey (I know the same is true for Dorothy Boulton who grew up across the river in New York City.). I certainly knew the story as recounted at the end of Luke's Gospel and here in Acts. And it's really only told by Luke (if you don't count the reference to it in Mark 16, which was later added to his Gospel). I never really paid much attention to it and really didn't know what to do with it. I was really surprised to discover, the year that I lived in Europe, that the seventh Thursday of Easter was a major church and national holiday, even a bank holiday. Not in Presbyterian Scotland, mind you, but for most of continental Europe. I remember traveling through France with my dear friends Lawson and Sheila Brown, it was around this time thirty years ago, and I couldn't figure out why shops, restaurants, museums, and banks were closed on a Thursday in May. It was Ascension Day. Some places close down Thursday and Friday and make a long weekend out of it. Why not?

This is a good reminder and example that modern, extremely secular Europe actually sits on a Christian base, lives within a Christian framework. You can see this on any given Sunday in Europe. The majority of Europeans never darken the door of a church and are marginally Christian, but Sunday remains a sabbath; shops and restaurants are closed, people rest, they don't work, they spend time with family, friends, and picnic outdoors when the weather is good.

Ascension of the Lord was one of the major feast days of the church reaching back to at least the fourth century, yet it was largely forgotten by most Protestants, even though we confess in the *Apostles' Creed*, “[Christ] ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. And thence he will come to judge the quick and the dead.” It’s inclusion in the creed suggests that it was a foundational part of the Christian tradition, but it’s not immediately clear, as least to many today, why it’s so significant. What do we make of this story?

A literal reading of the Ascension is problematic. The cosmology or worldview of Luke is so foreign to the way we understand the world. In the first century, “heaven,” the dwelling place of God, was thought to be “up there” in the heavens. The blue sky was considered the floor of heaven. Jesus’ departure into heaven was conceived as “being taken up,” as a literal ascension. The text is shaped by a pre-scientific cosmology. We now know above the blue sky is an enormous universe that is, at this moment, rapidly expanding at a dizzying speed. Where exactly is heaven? Biblical scholar James Dunn describes the Ascension as at best a puzzle and at worst an embarrassment for an age that no longer conceives of a physical Heaven located above the Earth.<sup>1</sup> Douglas Farrow, who teaches at McGill University, says in modern times the Ascension is seen less as the climax of the mystery of Christ than as “something of an embarrassment in the age of the telescope and the space probe,”<sup>2</sup> an “idea [that] conjures up an outdated cosmology.”<sup>3</sup>

If we set differences in cosmology aside, we might be able to see a deeper theological claim of this story. We could say that the text reflects a paradox that the early, post-Easter church had to come to terms with: Jesus was absent and at the same time present. Yes, they knew Jesus will come again and yet, at the same time, he was, he is also still here. The ascension speaks to

this experience, this interplay, this dialectic, this dynamic of presence and absence. Jesus is absent and yet present. Jesus is present yet absent. His absence evokes his presence. This ambiguity or paradox is not unlike the mystery that we experience when we share the Lord's Supper. The Eucharist symbolizes both presence and absence.

And the “link” or linchpin who holds both presence and absence together, who *uses* the interplay, this dialectic, who breathes in this in-between is none other than the Holy Spirit. Jesus intentionally removes himself in order to make way for us to experience a new, perhaps even deeper manifestation of his presence (see [John 14:12](#)). His departure paves the way for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit comes power, the power of love to upend and transform all things. Jesus says as much, “...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The ascension of Jesus marks the beginning of a new age, it's the time of his reign, which leads to the time of the Spirit, and it's a time that waits for his return. This between time, time between the times, is also, as Acts tells us, the time of the *church*, time *for* the church. And, as we know, the church has been in this time for a long time.

The emphasis upon time, however, should not distract us from something else that's also going on in Acts. Jesus' ascension “up,” his translation to a new “place,” and the descent of the Spirit upon us, upon these “places,” means that now we must become conscious of the “space of Jesus Christ, the spaces he wishes to inhabit and to enter in,”<sup>4</sup> the spaces he wishes to inhabit through his witnesses, through you and me, in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, in Baltimore, in Baltimore County and Howard County, and to the ends of the earth. Willie James Jennings, a contemporary theologian who teaches at Yale Divinity School, makes this point in his reading of Acts. “If the ascended Lord embraces our time as his time to be made known, then he also seeks to walk in the places of this world to announce his life given for the world.”<sup>5</sup> This means that we are being called to pay attention to the places, especially the unlikely places, the marginal places and spaces where the Spirit is pitching a tent, tabernacling among us, dwelling in and incarnating the body of Christ.

“Jesus ascends,” Jennings argues, “not only to establish presence through absence, but he also draws his body into the real journeys of his disciples into the world.” Jesus “goes to heaven for us, ahead of us. He goes with and ahead of his disciples into the real places of this world. He is Lord of time (past, present, and future) yet walking in our time, and he is Lord of space (here and there) yet taking our spaces and places with utmost seriousness.”<sup>6</sup>

Jennings is brilliant here and beautifully envisions a way to consider the significance of the ascension. “Jesus’ ascension,” he says, “is in fact God claiming our space as the sites for visitation, announcement of God’s desire to come to us. God’s desire will be seen in the pouring out of the Spirit in a specific place in order to enter specific places and specific lives. He ascends for our sake, not to turn away from us but to more intensely focus in on us.”<sup>7</sup>

Jesus’ ascent occasions the descent of the Spirit who continues the mission of God, who now comes even closer to us with a profound intimacy that might scare us, filling our hearts, enlivening our bodies and then moving and sending our bodies, taking up space within us and in the spaces between us, between bodies, and then holding us, arranging bodies, and forging us into something new, into a new humanity ([Ephesians 2:15b-16](#)), a new creation ([2 Cor. 5:17](#)), what the New Testament calls *ekklesia*: church.

We are the objects of God's self-giving, the recipients of a "power" that wants nothing more than to come close to us and pull us together and bring life. The Spirit has chosen us, calls us into *church*, to be engaged in the same work. The Spirit desires to inhabit the spaces of our lives and draws us together into a new space. The Spirit's aim is always communion, community, *koinonia*, drawing us deeper and deeper into the life of God, drawing us closer and closer to one another. This means the church is always called to share its space with others, and, at the same time, called to move into new spaces, territories, new domains of thought and practice and culture that might disturb and frighten us, spaces we would rather not frequent.

As we move toward Pentecost next week and the weeks that follow, we will be spending a lot of time in the book of Acts. One of the strong, steady currents flowing through Acts is this claim: The Spirit is always pressing disciples, pressing the church to venture into new spaces, into new territories, to cross boundaries of thought, practice, and culture, transgress borders, the borders between Jew and Gentile, borders separating clean and unclean, male and female, slave and free. Bringing together disparate groups and peoples. The same is no less true today.

The church exists for the mission of God—and it has no other reason for being. And the church goes where the Spirit sends it, sends it to inhabit, bearing witness to what we have discovered in Christ. God desires to be close to us, to you and me, and to all of creation, that we be one. And so the Spirit draws us deeper and deeper, all peoples, into a deeper communion that saves us from isolation and all that divides and separates us from one another.

*This* is the demanding-yet-joyful work of the church—demanding if not impossible work, because, as we know, the forces are legion that fight to divide, separate, and isolate us from one another, from God, from ourselves. Nevertheless, there is no way we can deny this truth: the disrupting presence of the Spirit continues to entice us down the still more excellent way of love. *This* is why we are here; *this* is why the church exists. And it's a privilege that we get to be a part of it all!



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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Turid Karlsen Seim, "The Resurrected Body in Luke-Acts: The Significance of Space." In Turid Karlsen Seim and Jorunn Økland, Jorunn, eds. *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practice in Early* (Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Douglas B. Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas B. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Jennings, 18-19

<sup>6</sup> Jennings, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Jennings, 19.