

Ascension Day – The Responsibility is Now Ours

Acts 1:1-11 & Luke 24:44-53, May 16, 2010

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One of my favorite books – one that truly speaks to me – is by someone who is not a theologian but a literary critic – indeed, he's not even a Christian, but what he speaks about is taken straight from our Christian story. The book is *Real Presences*, and the author is George Steiner. Speaking of the period from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, Steiner writes: "The lineaments of that Sunday carry the name of hope...." He goes on, though, to describe life as he perceives that we have to live it after our Lord's time on earth and his coming again: "But ours," Steiner says, "is the long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other."

We can look back at the story of Holy Week we heard about not so very long ago, and we can remember the crushing blow to his disciples that the crucifixion dealt; we remember also the immediate aftermath, as they locked themselves into their upper room out of fear. To be sure, Jesus had told them several times that he was going to have to suffer and die; but he told them also that he would rise again. However, between the death and the Resurrection the disciples were left on that "long day's journey of the Saturday," with nothing but prayer, and hope, left to them. It's a place we've all known in our lives – that in-between spot, as we are caught between despair and confidence. Perhaps you remember these lines of T.S. Eliot's:

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow
Life is very long.

Isn't it easy to resonate with those sentiments? Much of our lives really is lived in the midst of that tension – the bad news of the newspapers and newscasts battering our confidence that all will, that all must, someday be well again. Well, in a way we recapitulate the tensions of Holy Week this week, as we celebrate the feast of the Ascension. As the response to the despair of Good Friday can't really come until the joy of the Resurrection, the response to the loss once again of the Risen Lord can't truly actuate until the miracle of Pentecost; so we are, with his Ascension, once again sort of replaying Good Friday, and the period of the next ten days of our Christian calendar must feel something like Holy Saturday – until the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

But this period is with a very different feel from Holy Saturday. The good news of the gospel is that, much as I often feel the plaintive hope amidst the often bad news of everyday life, which is Steiner's message about how life is like in the Holy

Saturday of our lives, it needn't be that way. And it is today's gospel reading that we should be able to turn to for the assurance of that fact. With Jesus' departure the disciples are left once again on their own. He is no longer present either as their companion on the roads of Galilee or as the crucified Christ, now risen.

This time, though, although they are once again alone – having seen, having heard, and even, having eaten with the Risen Lord, the disciples can this time have confidence that what he has told them they can rely on: “I will be sending upon you,” Christ said, “what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” And so, Luke tells us, the disciples watched him depart – being carried into Heaven – and then, rather than wrapping themselves in despair and fear, as before, they “returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

Many Protestant churches slip past Ascension Day as though it were not on the calendar at all. For them, the Easter miracle, and then the birth of the Christian Church at Pentecost suffice, but that's a shame, since, whether a factual statement of what actually happened in such a way that it could have been captured on film, had there been cameras available at the time, or merely metaphor, there is a powerful symbolic value to the story of the Ascension. Last year I made some comments about the difficulty of accepting literally the stories about the Ascension as told in Luke and Acts. You heard differences in today's two accounts, and yet they were, in fact, written by the same person. For starters, in the account of Luke's gospel the first appearance after the Resurrection – to the two travelers on the road to Emmaus – and then to the disciples, and, indeed, his Ascension as well, all appear to occur on the same day, whereas in the Book of Acts, Luke tells us that, after the Easter event, Jesus spent 40 days with the apostles until he ascended to heaven. In Acts the disciples seem not quite to understand what has happened, since “two men in white,” presumably angels, had to explain it to them, whereas there is no mention of them in the gospel account. And, of course, there is the difficulty, for both Luke and us, of conceptualizing what has happened in terms of a three-dimensional universe – we surely know now, at least, that Heaven can hardly be spoken of as literally up above the clouds, the direction depicted for Jesus' movement in both accounts.

But Ascension is, whether fact or metaphor, a really powerful image, because it depicts the end, finally, of the incarnation of God into a human body, to live a life as one of us, even to suffer as one of us. But, on the other hand, it also marks a new beginning, for no longer can we look to God, either as an intervener reaching out to us through burning bushes or whirlwinds, or even dreams and visions, as depicted in the Hebrew scriptures, or in the person of, and therefore through the words and works of, the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Now, with Jesus' final withdrawal from this world of space and time, we become God's only physical means of acting in the world. We truly become Christ's body.

It's just a little frightening, isn't it? When he was here, we could rely on him to cure the sick, to cast out the demons, even to raise the dead. And his charisma! This is the man who walked down by the lake and merely had to say, “Come with me,” and they

came. But now we're all we have if God's work is to be done. When we pray "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven," are we supposed to just wait here for those divine lightning bolts to take care of business? Are we going to go into our own upper rooms and wait for Christ's return? No, my brothers and sisters in Christ, Ascension Day is worth celebrating because it is a kind of rite of passage for humans – it marks our transition from children, to be taken care of by our Father and Jesus, our older brother, to adults, who take care of our own business. And in just another week we'll be celebrating the day when, because he is now absent from our world in any physical form, God, through his Holy Spirit, descends to dwell, not within only Jesus, but instead within each and every one of us. When, at least symbolically, God breathed life into the first man, Adam, it was with his *ruach*, his spirit (his breath), and it is that same spirit that will now indwell us and serve as our comforter, our guide, and our conscience.

The editor of *Christianity Today* magazine, and highly respected writer on our religion, Philip Yancey, has this to say about the position we find ourselves in now that we have only ourselves to look to. "I find it much easier," he writes in *Reaching for the Invisible God*, "to accept the fact of God dwelling in Jesus of Nazareth than in the people who attend my local church and in me. Yet the New Testament insists this pattern fulfills God's plan from the beginning: not a continuing series of spectacular interventions but a gradual delegation of his mission to flawed human beings.... What Jesus brought to a few – healing, grace, hope, the good news message of God's love – his followers could now bring to all."

As I think of the implications of this transfer of responsibility, it all seems almost overwhelming. I simply can't accomplish all that Jesus accomplished. Well, truly, I don't have to. That God's Holy Spirit is within me doesn't require me to do alone all that needs to be done. The Spirit is in all of us. Together we comprise Christ's body. We just need to be a little more worthy of the trust God has reposed in us. If we each did just one more act of kindness to another person each day than we have been accustomed to do, haven't we begun at least to earn that trust?

AMEN