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Where Christ Is (Acts 1. 1-11)

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Of all the events attached to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Ascension is perhaps the strangest of all – and when you think of the virgin birth, the feeding of the five thousand, and the resurrection from the dead – that’s saying quite something! Indeed, as an account of the end of Jesus’ earthly career, the Ascension can feel a bit like that episode in a long-running TV series, where the actor playing the main character has decided to leave the show and has to be shuffled off-stage in what’s usually a deeply unconvincing way.

In the New Testament literature, we have two accounts of Jesus’ ascension into heaven – both penned by the evangelist Luke. The first occurs at the end of his gospel. This version of events has Jesus ‘carried up into heaven’ on the evening of Easter Day itself (Luke 24.51), after he’s completed a whirlwind tour of resurrection appearances. Yet by the time Luke writes his sequel to the gospel, the book known as the Acts of the Apostles, he’s introduced a delay of forty days between Easter and the Ascension. A period during which Jesus is said to have made numerous appearances, presenting himself alive to his disciples ‘by many convincing proofs’ (Acts 1.3).

It seems pretty clear that this shift in timing is theologically driven. Forty, as you know, is a number in Scripture that represents a period of major transition or transformation, and sometimes of testing. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness before entering the promised land; Moses forty days and nights on Mount Sinai before receiving the Law; and Jesus forty days of temptation before beginning his public ministry. So forty days for the disciples to be inducted into the mystery of post-resurrection life doesn’t seem unreasonable or scripturally surprising. Conveniently, it also enables Luke to locate the descent of the Holy Spirit a neat fifty

days after the resurrection. This event, which we'll celebrate next week, corresponds to and refigures the Jewish festival of Pentecost or Weeks, which was celebrated fifty days after the gathering of the first fruits of the harvest. The narrative chronology is beautifully symbolic and tells you much about how Luke sees the meaning of it all. The question is, what meaning might it have for us?

In my opening joke, I played on a sense that the supposed event of Ascension seems to us weird, arbitrary, unconvincing. As I've reflected on it more, however, I've been struck by the continuities of this story with aspects of the resurrection narratives. And I'm wondering if attending to these continuities might be helpful.

A consistent element in the gospel accounts of the resurrection involves the dynamic of recognition and non-recognition. In story after story, the risen Jesus is said to appear to his disciples, but they do not know it is him; their 'eyes are kept from recognising him'. The disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke), Mary Magdalene at the tomb (John), some of the disciples at the end of Matthew's gospel, the disciples fishing on Lake Galilee (John) ... none of them can see him at first. And what this seems to be about is the necessity of some shift in perception, some change or turning in the self. 'We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are', is a saying often cited by Richard Rohr. And certainly the New Testament seems to insist that to become capable of recognising the risen Christ involves some transformation in the one who beholds – a transformation effected by his presence and call.

Alongside this aspect of the resurrection stories, is a persistent intertwining of Jesus' presence with his absence. The first sign of resurrection is an absence – the empty tomb – and Mark's gospel never gets further than this. And in the other accounts, stories of Jesus' appearance to and presence with his disciples are punctuated by his sudden disappearance or sending of them away. He broke bread with the disciples at Emmaus: 'then their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight' (Luke 24.31); the women in Matthew to whom Jesus suddenly appears are told to 'go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee'; and similarly Mary Magdalene, the minute she has recognised him in the garden, is told

‘do not hold on to me, because [and this is interesting] I have not yet ascended to my Father’. And she too is dismissed: ‘go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God”’. (John 20.17) If the dynamic of recognition and non-recognition is about how we become capable of seeing, the dynamic of presence and absence seems to be about what we’re permitted to possess or take hold of for ourselves.

Against this background, the Ascension no longer seems like some episode tacked on to the end that accounts for the risen Christ being not bodily still with us. Rather it’s consistent, it’s the culmination of how it’s been ever since the resurrection. Which suggests that whatever this new life in Christ is about, this new way of relating to God we’re being called to, there’s an elusiveness, a non-fixity, a dispossession built in. So what that’s about?

According to our passage from Acts, when the disciples are gathered together at Jesus’ direction, they ask him, ‘is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ Exactly the same preoccupation was expressed by the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Talking to Jesus, whom they have not yet recognised, about their life with him, they say: ‘we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel (Luke 24.21). According to Luke then, even after the crucifixion, even after those early resurrection encounters, the disciples continue to operate with a vision of a God whose primary role is to shore up their national identity, to restore worldly power to their community. It’s a vision of God that is a function of them and their desire, a God who fulfils their agenda and who will (one day) defeat their enemies. And lest we feel a bit condescending about that – I wonder if any of us has not been, like them, disappointed, angry or disillusioned when ‘God’, the God we have projected and imagined, has failed to do what we expected or yearned for or demanded be done?

According to the gospels, the risen Jesus persistently eludes the disciples’ attempt to corral him into their agenda or to possess him for themselves. Again and again, he makes it known that the true God transcends any control or influence we

attempt to exert – God is not ‘our’ God over against others; rather we are God’s people. And this means that our true identity may be discovered only in the process of waiting on God – a God who eludes our imaginings and remains always hidden at some level from our sight. And this isn’t God being cruel or withholding. It’s just that it’s only as this happens that we are liberated from the tyranny of our small, self-sufficient, controlling selves and enabled to hand ourselves over to participate in the larger life – living, so to speak ‘beyond ourselves’, living responsively, ‘as listeners’. If this is so, then the Ascension, the final disappearance of Jesus from the realm of ordinary sense perception and relation, is intrinsic to the pedagogy of faith. It’s necessary for our transformation to be complete.

As for ‘what happened’? Well, for myself, I am happy to remain agnostic about the mechanics. Australian poet Lisa Jacobson, wondering ‘where god lives now’, writes: ‘If you ask a priest, he’ll point up. If you ask black fellas, they’ll point down to stones that sing and rivers vibrating underground’.¹ And there’s an amazing painting of Jesus’ ascension by Australian indigenous artist, Shirley Purdie, which depicts him ascending *down*, into the earth, where God the ‘Creator Spirit resides’. In the end, of course, the Ascension is not about geography; it’s about being ever more finely attuned to the ever-present Presence, as we let go our projections and demands and are yielded beyond ourselves to the God who encompasses all. ‘Set your minds’, wrote St Paul, ‘on things that are above’ – or maybe they are below or beyond or saturating here and now; set your minds ‘where Christ is’, for ‘your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory’ (Colossians 3. 2-4).

¹ Lisa Jacobson, ‘There Are Stones That Sing’ in *south in the world* (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014), p.89.