A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“A Feast of Silence”*

Acts 1:1-11

Ascension Day

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The manifestation of God on earth in Jesus Christ dramatically concludes on the Mount of Olives with the Ascension. The book of Acts tells that the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples after his suffering for 40 days. He taught them about God’s kingdom, and of their vocation as apostles to their neighbors and all the nations. Then, somewhere on the Mount of Olives, Jesus was taken from their presence; just like that, he’s gone and we are left here on earth. A dramatic end opens the way to a new beginning.

That moment, frozen in time, is a profoundly human moment for the little group left behind. What were they feeling in that moment? Confusion, fear, that ache in your chest when someone you love departs? Or were they feeling empowered, energized, ready to take on the world?

Whatever it was, they were standing there in the wake of what they’d just experienced when they were confronted by an angel, “Why are you just standing there?” As if it should have been obvious to them that they should be doing anything else but stand there. What would you have done? I’d have just stood there with a big, dumb look on my face. I am confident I would have stood there along with whomever else was there, gazing into the distance, trying to make sense of what’s happened and trying to get a grip on what’s going to happen. The Ascension, whatever it looked like and whatever their experience was, is a big, mysterious, wonderful thing.

It means Jesus is no longer with us in the body. They thought they’d already crossed that terrible bridge. They had, once. They thought, quite understandably, that Jesus’ death meant he was gone. But then, miracle upon miracle, he was with them again in the garden, in the upper room, on the road to Emmaus, and all the other places they encountered Jesus raised from the grave. Acts says it was 40 days which in the Bible means a long time. It was a long time he was with them, but it wouldn’t be forever and ever, not the way they may have thought. The resurrected Christ would not continue forever and ever to lead his disciples, appear to them, give proofs of his resurrection. Whether they saw it coming or not I don’t know, but I suspect not. But one day, ready or not, he leads them up the Mount of Olives.

From the top of the mount you could look down over the city. They could look down and see the Temple, Pilate’s palace, the city walls, ant-sized Roman soldiers patrolling the streets, and other people going about their regular lives. But their lives would never be the same again when Jesus left them behind.

Ascension Day, forty days after Easter, celebrates this mystery. In some parts of the world, the celebration of Ascension is one of the most important holidays of the year. You may know how much I appreciate the writings of Thomas Merton. As for many people, so much of what he said opens doors of spiritual meaning for me. Ascension Day was apparently one of Merton’s favorite feast days. When you’re living a discipled monastic life, I imagine any feast day—Christmas, Easter, Arbor Day, anything--is cause for celebration, but Ascension had special significance for him. This is what he wrote one Ascension Day:

**“[The Ascension] is the feast of silence and interior solitude when we go up to live in heaven with Jesus: for he takes us there, after he has lived a little while on earth among us.  This is the grace of Ascension Day: to be taken up into the heaven of our own souls, the point of immediate contact with God.  To rest on this quiet peak, in the darkness that surrounds God.  To live there through all trials and all business with the “tranquil God who makes all things tranquil.” (*The Sign of Jonas*)**

As usual, Merton writes insightfully and poetically about his subject. We can immediately hear the significance of the day much more than most of us have ever assigned to it. He describes it as a feast of silence. The shocked silence of the disciples is witness that before we start filling the void with all of our words, let there be silence. So yes, it is a feast of silent—wonder, adoration, worship—before a God whose mysterious power transcends human finitude.

We begin in silence, yes. And Merton says we rest on this quiet peak in the darkness that surrounds God. He’s acknowledging our humility before an ascendant God whose mystery is ultimately shrouded from our sight. God is beyond us. To be in God’s presence is both to know God and not to know God, but to know that we don’t fully know God. That’s the joy, of knowing you are in the presence of the true God who far exceeds the heights and depths of all human knowledge.

We begin in silence, we end in the joy of the mystery. Yes, that’s where we are drawn today. But Merton says more about the ascension that I’m just not so sure about. With all due respect, I’m just not at all sure that Merton’s description is really what Ascension Day was or is about. Like when he says: “the Ascension is when we go up to live in heaven with Jesus.” Surely we can say that Jesus took compassion for all humanity with him to heaven, that he took with him our prayers and the brokenness of humanity with him. Christ ascended with his wounds. He ascended with his humanity. So in that sense he took us up with him. But, as far as I can tell, we did not go up to live in heaven with Jesus. The ascension story is exactly that we weren’t taken up to live in heaven with Jesus. Just when we thought that we should be taken up, we weren’t. We were left here with our boots still in the dirt.

Ascension is about how we were left behind here, seemingly without a point of immediate contact with God. That’s the drama of the story. He went away, and we were still here with that rock still in our sandals, with blood still coursing through our veins, with colds and cancers, loves and resentments, courage and fear, answers and so many questions. No Uber chariot of fire was summoned down from the skies to pick up waiting heavenly pilgrims so they could sing “I’ll fly away oh glory, I’ll fly away,” while they were whisked to the great by-and-by in the sky.

That’s the moment in time in which the apostles stand frozen: when they thought they were going with him, but they weren’t, not yet anyway. Were they more surprised that Jesus was taken or that they weren’t all taken, too? If Christianity were about escaping this life and this body to be taken to heaven, wouldn’t you think that’s what would have happened right then in this moment, as a witness to all future Christians that this future awaits you, too, if you’ll just believe in the resurrected Christ? That’s the way to tell that story if that’s what this story is all about: have the disciples receive their reward for their faithfulness and the gift of grace even in their failures by having them depart with Jesus. Tell that story and promise people if they will come to Jesus they, too, will escape the cares of this world, if not dramatically like the disciples, then surely soon. Tell them that Christianity is about being in the world but not of the world, and that their true home is in the sky. Tell them they are just passing through this world onto the next and so this world doesn’t really matter.

There will be some real comfort in that message. For people who can barely hang on, for those suffering, hearing that a blessed future awaits with God is nothing but good news enough to keep going one more day. We all need that kind of news sometimes. To hear that this world is not your home is nothing but good news when the problems and pressures of this world are almost too much to bear. We need hope, we all do. And there’s truth in it, surely. The material world is not all there is, there is also a spiritual realm and no matter what may come, there is always faith, hope, and love. Indeed, if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But the disciples were left here, as apostles and witnesses. What is that telling us if not that the Christian way is a way of being human in this world, not just biding time until the next one comes? The Christian way of life is not just about flying away into the next life, it’s totally about walking in this one. This one, this life in this world in which the Mount of Olives still rises from the valley just to the east of Jerusalem. It’s not a big mountain, never was. You can easily pass around it or over it just like Jesus and his disciples did a number of times. Nowadays it’s surrounded by sprawling Jerusalem and East Jerusalem.

If you go there today you’ll see that at the highest point of the Mount of Olives stands a rectangular tower with a pointed roof. It is one of the tallest points in and around Jerusalem. From wherever you are in the city, you can see the tower by day or lit up by night. The tower stands by the Church of the Ascension which is a simple, stunning sanctuary built over 100 years ago by German Christians. So if you go to Jerusalem and walk up the Mount of Olives to the exact place where possibly Jesus ascended from the earth, there, waiting for you, you will find Lutherans!

If you find those Lutherans you’ll find the tower and the church, plus a small guest house for pilgrims. While you’re there you can climb the tower and look out over the city, and visit the church. A fine mosaic decorates the apse. Jesus is in the center, ascending to the sky. Flanking him on the left and right are two angels, gesturing to him with their hands as if in worship or witness. But their eyes, their eyes are not on him. They are not watching him. They are watching you. As if they are saying, what are you doing here? Why are you still looking up to the sky? The Lutherans on the Mount of Olives take that to heart.

It’s more than a guest house and church. In one of the most contested, tense places on earth, right in the heart of East Jerusalem, overlooking the valley and Palestinian check points, the contested temple mount, and the city, they maintain a small amphitheater where local churches come for Easter sunrise services. They run a café to which all are welcome, a small grocery store, an archeology office. They have a grove with hundreds of olive trees that volunteers harvest. Sales of olive oil support their school called Talitha Koum in Beit Jala, a Palestinian refugee camp. They run a kindergarten for children who have nowhere else to go to school and the Lutherans, as you might expect, have created a lighted, regulation soccer field for neighborhood children.

Yet still, even more amazing beyond the high bell tower, the mosaic, the kindergarten, soccer fields and olive oil, is the Augusta Victoria Hospital located right on top of Mt. Olivet, possibly right where Jesus ascended and left his disciples behind. This hospital provides modern specialized medical care for Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It is the first and only hospital to provide radiation therapy for cancer patients in the Palestinian territories and the only medical facility in the West Bank offering pediatric kidney dialysis. They provide palliative and elderly care among several other specialties. The hospital’s mission is to provide health services otherwise unavailable to the Palestinian community. These are people in desperate social need seeking life-saving specialized care and there’s one place on earth where they can get it. (<https://jerusalem.lutheranworld.org/content/augusta-victoria-hospital-91>)

In just the place where Jesus left disciples to be his witnesses and to live for the kingdom of God in this world, disciples of Jesus today are doing it. Christ leaves us and is taken away into heaven, but is also given to us in a more universal way through the Spirit. That Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, lives on in and among us today in redemptive, compassionate, hopeful acts of love and grace all over the world. On Mt. Olivet and all over the world, here too, Christians are living and witnessing to their faith in the living Lord, who is not with us bodily, but empowers us by his spirit.

Here’s a powerful poem, a Sonnet for Ascension Day: (<https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2011/06/02/ascension-day-sonnet/>)

We saw his light break through the cloud of glory  
Whilst we were rooted still in time and place  
As earth became a part of Heaven’s story  
And heaven opened to his human face.  
We saw him go and yet we were not parted  
He took us with him to the heart of things.  
The heart that broke for all the broken-hearted  
Is whole and Heaven-centred now, and sings,  
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,  
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,  
Whilst we our selves become his clouds of witness  
And sing the waning darkness into light,  
His light in us, and ours in him concealed,  
Which all creation waits to see revealed.

May you know the ministry of God’s Spirit intimately with you, and by that Spirit, live with joy, hope, and in the way of Jesus our Lord this day and all the days of your life.

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