

Reflection: From a Different Perspective Ascension Sunday

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Acts 1: 1-11

This week as I was preparing to preach on the Ascension, Maureen P was preparing to read the text, and presented me with the fruits of some research. Engaged by her study of the text for this week, she went online to find different images of artwork that has depicted the Ascension of Jesus into heaven.

All these images, from different times and places show Jesus in process of separation from the apostles.



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As I reflected on these pictures, with very familiar imagery from my childhood, something in me found them quite troubling. While they are beautifully composed, and skillfully executed, they depict a view of the ascension of Jesus into heaven as one that can not make any sense for a post-modern person with a worldview that is utterly different to the idea of the three-tiered universe—heaven above us, earth right here, and *sheol*, or hell below us.

They look like Jesus being beamed up to an alien “mothership” just out of view. The text, and the art it has inspired, are based on an ancient and different cosmology, one that puts God above, transcendent and distant from creation.

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Images: #1: Brooklyn museum: artist: James Tissot, 1836-1902; #2 from Beaumont Lead Glass; #3 Gutenberg: from Gutenberg.org, The Gutenberg EBook of our Day, W.A. Spicer, copyright standard pub. Co.; #4 Giotto di Bondone (c. 1266-1337/ Florentine); #5 REMBRANDT Ascension of Christ 1636; from micahchristensen

I wrestled with the text, and with the images—and at times I wondered what on earth I could say about this doctrine of Ascension that would have any relevance to any of us here today.

Then I came across this last picture—it is “[The Ascension of Christ](#),” by Salvador Dali, painted in 1958. The first thing I noticed was the startlingly different perspective—Jesus was not being beamed upright to some heaven up above the sky, but rather he looks like he is being pulled inwards into this bright light. We are shown the skyline to establish that this is not a view of ascension from below from the earth. We see the body of Jesus—feet pointing out at us, arms outstretched, hands clawing the air. The body, despite our limited view of it, looks alive—it is not the dead the crucified Christ, it is the risen Christ.



There are clouds and what looks like explosions around the top edges—with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at the top of the picture, just underneath a woman’s head¹ perhaps representing God? I found myself fascinated by this picture—it kept popping into my head all week. I just had to find out more about it.

Apparently Dali was inspired by a vivid dream he had years before the painting—of the nucleus of an atom—which is what is represented by the round bright yellow object in the background of the painting. Dali had a fascination for nuclear physics, and he came to think that the nucleus of the atom, then the smallest known building block of matter, was the true representation of the unifying spirit of Christ². In his painting he is describing what I would call “**transcension**” not ascension, or being pulled through the dimensions of space and time right into the heart of God.

The ascension story is actually in two of the texts for today, but we only heard one of them. The other version of the story is from the ending of the Gospel of Luke, and the one we heard is from the very beginning of Acts, which is like Luke’s sequel to his gospel—and I found it really interesting that both of these ascension accounts have significant differences—in Luke, the ascension takes place the same day as the resurrection, whereas in Acts it takes place forty days after the resurrection, ten days before Pentecost. Another big difference is found in the ending. In the acts reading we hear of the pair of angelic messengers reminding the apostles to look out, not up—they had previously appeared at the empty tomb and did the same thing for the women—asking “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” To the apostles who are left craning their necks, with their heads in the clouds, they ask “Galileans, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” The ending of Luke’s gospel has no angels

¹ Gala Dali, wife and muse of Salvador Dali.

² <http://www.moodbook.com/art/salvador-dali.html>

speaking to the apostles; instead they joyfully return to Jerusalem praising God and remain continually in the Temple blessing God.

The fact that there is a significant difference in the same story, as told by the same storyteller reminded me not to be so literal! Despite everything I know about biblical criticism, I sometimes slip into a more literal reading of the New Testament than the Old. It's easier not to read literally the stories of the Garden of Eden, and Noah's Arc, Jonah being swallowed by the whale. It's easier to fall into the trap of reading the Gospels as a biography or history. I had to be reminded, just like the apostles, to get my head out of the clouds—to look outward and inward instead of upward to find meaning in the ascension. And we each have to do that for ourselves.

I think that one of the reasons Dali's art really captured me was because it reminded me of the importance of perspective. When you turn something on its side or upside down, or even just view it from a different angle, you not only see it in a different way, and you sometimes notice really surprising things about it. You can get a new appreciation for the once familiar. It is seeing something from a different point of view.

In the older cosmology and theologies, people tended to focus on the divinity of Jesus, his transcendence—or being seated at the right hand of God, who is entirely distant from us and our reality. This is represented in the paintings we saw as Jesus being physically separated from the apostles by the space and the cloud.

And as with all things, the pendulum of popular belief swings and now, I think in the past century, since the search for the historical Jesus, we tend to try to domesticate him. It can be more comforting and reassuring for us to imagine him as a living, breathing man, a Jewish teacher and healer who walked the dusty roads of Palestine two thousand years ago. We want to know exactly who he was and what he said and did. And this kind of reading is great, except when it comes to the mysterious and the miraculous. It can fall in to the trap, as I did of trying to explain the ineffable, such as the idea of Jesus being pulled into the heart of God. This kind of reading removes the mystery—when we try to explain away the sacred or the holy with science and history and rational thought, we can remove the power of the original story—or stories.

My different perspective of Ascension of Jesus to God is more like Dali's than Jesus being beamed up. It's one that is more of a dispersion. If I imagine God as being everywhere, then the thought of Jesus going to God is more like the image of Jesus breaking into billions of particles of light and energy—of the spirit of Christ suffusing all of creation. I see heaven and God's realm not as something separated from us by space, but rather heaven is right here. Thoreau said "heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads" and I think that works in both the literal and figurative senses. Heaven is over our heads in terms of mystery. There is the element of divine mystery beyond human understanding, and there is the element of divine mystery that is tangible, that is right here, under our feet. God and heaven, both transcendent and immanent.

We can, by doing as Dali did, try to look from a different perspective in order to re-imagine the sacred. Sometimes that perspective can come from another culture.

“When European missionaries came to South Africa, they were faced with a theological conundrum. The indigenous people, Zulu, Xhosa, *et al*, believed that “God” who they named Nkulunkulu (The Biggest One), Vulindhlela (The Way opener) lived in the ground. Caves and holes were sacred spaces. The European missionaries were creed bound to teach that God lived in the sky, and also that there was a place called hell (which African cosmology had no reference, or need for) deep in the earth. The way they did this “preaching” was to literally turn the psyche of Africans around from the God of the deep to the God of the sky, thus creating a deep tear in the soul of Africans who were already, by their very nature, profoundly theistic people.”³

Instead of being open to a different perspective, the missionaries believed that there was only one possible way of seeing things, one right way of understanding God, their way. It is good for us to shift our perspective on God—to take a break from looking up, to looking for evidence of God right here amongst us in our midst. And that has been the gift of Barbara Brown Taylor’s *An Altar in the World*. She reminds us “*Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.*”⁴

I think this is what the two angels are trying to do in the Acts version of the story. They are telling the Apostles, whose necks are craning up and back, to hold on to their last glimpse of Jesus, not to look upwards or backwards to find Jesus. They are trying to change the apostles’ perspective or point of view, from looking upwards and backwards, to looking outward and forward, to keep their feet on the ground and to carry on with their commission from Jesus—to be witnesses in word and in deed, not just here where they are in Jerusalem, to other Jews, but to reach outwards into all of Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth!

Earlier in the reading, Jesus had told those apostles who were asking about the restoration of the promised kingdom that it is not for them to know the time of the coming of the God’s realm. He told them to wait in Jerusalem for the power of the Holy Spirit before they go and testify. He leaves them in a liminal, or in between time. The waiting time between resurrection and ascension, Easter and Pentecost—the coming of the Holy Spirit. And what did they do in that liminal time? The beginning of chapter two tells how they gathered together, waited and prayed, organized and visioned. Sometimes it’s hard to be told to hurry up and wait. We want to move quickly on to the next thing. But the waiting time, the ‘in between’ time is important too. It doesn’t have to be wasted time. It is in this time that we can get fresh perspective. We can reorient ourselves with God.

We’re entering a bit of a liminal time here at Dunbar, a time when people are thinking of endings and beginnings. I first sensed this when people began to talk about

³ Peter Woods, <http://thelisteninghermit.wordpress.com/>

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*. p.15

our leaving, when the transition team kicked into gear. Over the past year we, that is all of us—congregation, staff and ministry team, have looked and been looked at from different perspectives. We have done a great job of looking forward and outward. We have sought God in our midst, we have carried on with God’s mission in the world. And as we enter this liminal time, perhaps the next chapter of Acts the first gathering of followers or church, is a good model for us too—to wait, and pray, gather in fellowship, organize, and vision, from a new perspective. May it be so.