

Staring into heaven

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Acts 1:1-11

I love the story of Christ's Ascension.

I find it thrilling.

It gives me goosebumps.

It's one of my very, very favorite stories in Scripture.

And yet, when I try to understand the Ascension, when I try to grasp what it means, I quickly feel the puniness of my intellect. And although others are more learned than I or have greater native intelligence, we humans are all limited in our capacity for knowledge, comprehension and consciousness.

I wonder if, in fact, the meaning of the Ascension is partly about the limitations of our human knowing. And this may alert us to a prior and broader reality: that Christ, in every feature of his being, is beyond ... beyond our sight, beyond our grasp.

Paradoxically, we Christians confess that he is and can be known, is in fact the full revelation of God and God's nature, God's glory, God's love and God's justice. And although the ascended Christ may now seem veiled from our sight, we Christians also proclaim that even with, or maybe in part *because of* his Ascension, you and I are never out of his sight. And we are altogether known by him.

In any case, should we not have been concerned all along if we imagined that we had Jesus all figured out? Did we really imagine that we understood all of the implications of his being and mission? Has he become so familiar to us, and we so comfortable with him, that we thought he had nothing more to show us or teach us or do for us?

And when was the last time I had one of those little wonderful or frightening seizures, having come upon some new implication for my own being – some new implication that arises by virtue of him and his being? Has my religion become reduced to a morality rule-

book or a quest for that elusive, perfect and perfectly beautiful liturgy? Have I forgotten that the morality and the liturgies are merely forms that may aspire to but will always fall short of the divine eternal loving reality to which, at their best, they aspire? All of that highest aspiration, we can now see, is the place to which Jesus has now ascended.

If I'm starting to sound a little kooky – this is what happens when I contemplate the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. And I wonder about you—where your mind and your imagination and your heart take you. If you, like me, come to the place where your comprehension fails, we should not feel shame due to our limitations. We will be better served by an appropriate joining of humility and gratitude. Not only that, we should stir up a big, fresh and potent batch of curiosity.

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” So say two guys in white robes. The question is addressed to those who had already been through so much with Jesus. And now this? This whatever-it-was-or-is that we now call the Ascension. My answer to those guys in white robes may have been this: *“Where else would I or should I be looking right now? Go find someone else to shame. I'm going to stand here and stare, full of wonder, because I'm not exactly sure about what I just saw or what it means, but I know it's BIG.”*

“And I guess I shouldn't be all that surprised, because since the first moment I knew him, Jesus has always been breaking out of and beyond my preconceptions of him. And he keeps drawing me into a life of mystery and love that just keeps getting bigger and more amazing. And I hope this whatever-it-is won't stop that. So, guys in robes, if you don't mind I'm going to stare a bit longer.”

As long as we are here on this earth and not in heaven, we will fall short in our comprehension of the Ascension. He has, in part, ascended out of our sight. Even so, let us remember that it is not mainly about physics or a really cool narrative. It's mainly and ultimately about that ultimate reality to which we give the names of God and eternity and love. And if that doesn't take your breath away, it's not only about God and eternity and love, it's also about our part in all of that, now and forever.

I encourage you, now on this beautiful and magnificent Feast of the Ascension, or maybe tomorrow as well, maybe every day, to take some time to stare into heaven. *Amen.*