

OUT OF THIS WORLD?

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Grace Church in New York
The Sunday after Ascension Day
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Jesus prayed for his disciples, saying, *“Holy Father ... I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.”* (John 17:15-16)

You may recall that last Saturday – a week ago yesterday – was a perfect spring day without a cloud in the sky. Coincidentally, it was also to be the great day of the year when Stacie and I would plant flats of vincas and impatiens in the flower bed and planters over by the rectory front door. I call the day “great” not because either of us has any prowess in the garden. Rather, the day’s annual arrival means we have reached a happy milestone in the year. Lent’s long shadows have departed. The weather is warming up, and a reasonable and holy hope for an eternal summer with those we love seems not so farfetched after all.

So we had work to do. The first task of the great day would be to obtain the flowers from the green market at Union Square. As I came out the front door, I noted that the cherry tree was in full bloom. This tree, and the magnolia next to it in the rectory yard, are just achingly beautiful when their blossoms reach their peak. Seriously, you ache to participate in such magnificence – to become one with it. But how? Passersby on Broadway stop and stare in astonishment at a sight that seems out of this world, even though it is firmly rooted in this world. They come inside the yard and take pictures. They gather up handfuls of petals that have fallen and breathe in their sweet aroma of springtime. Who can blame them? The trees declare the glory of God, and people yearn to be a part of it, fleeting though it may be. So with the cherry tree at its brilliant best, I knew we would have lots of company in the yard as we added our little contribution to God’s handiwork.

Nevertheless, I did not expect the kind of company I was about to encounter. As I approached the gate beneath the cherry tree, something large caught the upper reaches of my peripheral vision. I looked and there, high in the tree amidst the profusion of pink blossoms, was a young man sitting on a branch. I stopped and stared. Then for lack of anything better to say I called up to him, *“Hello! What are you doing up there?”* He replied, *“Dude, I need to be up here.”* Sometimes it’s very hard for me not to be snarky, and this was one of those times. So I responded, *“Dude, you need to be down here or else I’ll call the police.”* So down he came, and on his way out the gate he declared, *“Beautiful garden. Nice work, Dude.”* I should have been honored. Jesus, too, was once mistaken for the gardener! Although I don’t think Mary Magdalene presumed to call Jesus, “Dude.” Then again, maybe she did.

The more I’ve thought about my encounter with the man in the tree, I’ve realized that the incident isn’t entirely disconnected from today. Today is The Sunday after Ascension Day, the day we commemorate the departure of the risen Jesus from the company of his disciples. Today’s appointed readings from the Book of Acts and the Gospel of John don’t specifically describe the Ascension, but both allude to it. In Acts (1:22) we hear the disciple Peter speaking of Jesus and mentioning *the day he was taken up from us*. Also, in the Gospel of John we overhear Jesus praying to the Father, *“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.”* It’s a few verses before today’s reading in Acts (1:6-11) where we find the most vivid description of the actual event. The author – probably Luke – tells us that forty days after the first Easter, *Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight*. He just rose into the air until he disappeared into the sky. It’s as if the disciples could have said, *“Hello! What are you*

doing up there?” In reply, two men in white robes said, “*Men of Galilee – Dudes – why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*”

What are we to make of it? Why did the first followers of Jesus describe his departure in such dramatic terms? What did they mean? N.T. Wright is a Church of England bishop and one of the world’s most respected New Testament scholars. Concerning the resurrection appearances of Jesus, he encourages us to think not so much up and down, but back and forth. He writes:

Neither Luke nor the other early Christians thought Jesus had suddenly become a primitive spaceman ... They believed that heaven and earth are the two interlocking spheres of God’s reality, and that the risen body of Jesus is the first (and so far the only) object that is fully at home in both and hence in either, anticipating the time when everything will be renewed and joined together.¹

I take Wright to mean we should think of the resurrection appearances as if Jesus were stepping back and forth through a door between this room and another. Presumably one of the appearances turned out to be the final time the disciples saw the risen Jesus. Where did Jesus go? To the other sphere of God’s reality? Why would the disciples imbue his last leave-taking with such mystery if it were no different from his other comings and goings? Biblical scholars, theologians, and ordinary Christians have been puzzling over the Ascension for two-thousand years. To describe the reality of a new heaven and a new earth that they beheld in Jesus, the first witnesses reached for the language of poetry and theology, as if words could ever do justice to the fleeting beauty of a flowering tree in springtime. Nevertheless, what they seem to be saying is that if Easter were the first buds on the tree after the long cold winter, then the Ascension is the same tree at its brilliant best: at its highest, in full flower.

Make of the Ascension what you will. As for me, I love it! Even though it will be forever a mystery, I find something about it deeply appealing. It touches a spiritual desire that I think we all share, and that is the desire to rise above the ordinary, to soar beyond the petty, to transcend the limitations of gravity, time, and space. I hear the story of Jesus on Ascension Day and part of me aches to climb that tree and participate in the fair beauty of the Lord. Mind you, now, you won’t catch me literally climbing one of the rectory yard trees, but the young man who did wasn’t completely off the mark. His was a holy desire, though I don’t think he realized the spiritual significance of his confession that he needed to be up there. We all need to be up there.

Really? We all need to be up there? Not so fast! The fact is, a sign in the rectory yard says no climbing trees. The law of gravity says that you can’t levitate into the sky. The laws of physics say you can’t pass through a solid object such as a closed door. Like it or not, it would appear that we belong to the world, with all its laws and limitations that deny ascension. What holds us down besides nature itself? What inhibits our spirits from ascending? For some, it’s the residual scars of failed human relationships: a difficult upbringing in which parental blessing was never spoken, or an abusive marriage that annihilated self-esteem. For others, it’s the grinding effects of poverty, or some limiting physical condition they certainly didn’t ask for but have had to endure. For others it is grief that proves too heavy a burden to bear. Still others are unable to rise above a tragic mistake or series of mistakes they once made. The weight of guilt is with them every day.

In today’s reading from Acts we hear of the disciple Judas. Consider Judas, and his tragic mistake. Judas wanted for himself and all his Jewish countrymen the freedom to soar. What held them down, he believed, were the chains of Roman occupation. To cast these off he aligned himself with various revolutionary movements, and eventually with Jesus. Judas thought Jesus had all the charismatic potential to lead the Jews to new heights. He was right about the man, he was wrong about the method. One day an idea began building in Judas’ mind: to provoke a confrontation that Jesus would surely win, Judas *became a guide for those who arrested Jesus*;

Judas betrayed his master. As you know, his plan went horribly wrong. Today's reading from Acts omits the gruesome details of Judas' demise. But the Gospel of Matthew (27:3-5) reports that when Judas saw that Jesus was condemned to die, he rushed back to the authorities, pled the innocence of Jesus, and tried to purchase back the life of the one he betrayed. When Judas saw that all was lost, the weight of guilt was too heavy to bear. He went and hanged himself.

If only Judas could have held on till Easter to see the first signs of risen life, and then the full flowering of resurrection on Ascension Day. You see, one thing that God demonstrates for us in the rising of Jesus is that we get to participate in the life of God. Judas could have participated in the resurrection experience with Jesus and the other disciples. The risen Jesus lifts all of sinful humanity into the presence of God. Consider the disciple Peter, who speaks to us in today's reading from Acts. Peter bore a burden of guilt as heavy as the load that overwhelmed Judas. Yes, Judas betrayed Jesus, but Peter denied Jesus at three critical moments. Somehow the story of Peter turned out differently than the story of Judas. Peter, if by doing nothing else than waiting, allowed the risen Jesus to appear and pick him up again after his denials. Indeed, Peter became the unquestioned spokesperson of the new Christian movement.

Peter knew that he and his fellow apostles had work to do. It was not time to escape the world, but to reinvest in it. It was time to proclaim to the world through words and deeds that the fleeting glimpses of resurrection they'd experienced were just the beginning. It was a new day – a great day – and the first task of the great day was to elect a successor of Judas. The lot fell to Matthias, and the movement to reclaim and redeem the earth took root. You and I are part of it. In fact, in today's reading from John, Jesus prayed that we *not* be taken out of this world. Jesus prayed that we be *sanctified* – or set apart – for the work of God in the world. *As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world*, is what Jesus prayed to God. In other words, we may not be of this world, but we are in it. We may be citizens of heaven, but for now we are inhabitants of earth with a job to do.

If you look over by the rectory today, you will see that the flowers are in the ground. Now, not even a fortnight later, the dirt is out from under my fingernails, and the vincas and impatiens are beginning to grow. Last Saturday, as we were pressing the little plants into the earth, I remembered a moving passage that the author, E.B. White wrote about his wife Katherine, who was the longstanding fiction editor for the New Yorker magazine, and also an avid gardener. E.B. White described how one day every fall would be the great day that Katherine decreed the bulb garden must be planted. The day would often turn out to be cold and raw, *“but the bad weather did not deter Katharine: the hour had struck, the strategy of spring must be worked out according to plan.”* Then he continues:

As the years went by and age overtook her, there was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion – the small, hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection.²

Calmly plotting the resurrection. With four words E.B. White beautifully captures the mission of the church. What are we doing down here – or over here, whatever the case may be? We are calmly plotting the resurrection, trusting that there will be not only another spring, but in God's time an eternal summer with those we love, *under trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither (Psalm 1:3)*.

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¹ N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1*, WJK Press, 2008, p. 13.

² Katharine S. White, *Onward and Upward in the Garden*, Beacon Press, 1997, pp. xviii-xix.