

Wearing Our Crash Helmets

Sermon: Ascension/Easter 7C

May 8, 2016

St. Stephen's Belvedere
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- [Acts 1:1-11](#)
- [Ephesians 1:15-23](#)
- [Luke 24:44-53](#)
- [Psalm 47](#)



So, what difference does the Ascension make to your faith? Or does it make any difference at all?

Well, let's start with what image comes to mind when you think of the Ascension. Normally when we think of a painting about the Ascension, the view is from a distance. We see the front of Jesus, wearing billowing robes and floating in the air surrounded by clouds and angels. But I ask you to draw your attention to the cover art on your bulletin today. This is Salvador Dalí's painting called "The Ascension of Christ (1958)."¹ It's a very unique representation within the genre of Ascension paintings.

Could Dalí be showing us a more accurate rendering of what the disciples actually saw that day? Jesus had been standing right next to them as he blessed them, not standing far off in the distance. He was among them and suddenly he was taken up into heaven. It didn't happen way over there. No, it happened within their midst, right there, right then. And after Jesus ascended, two men in white, these angels said to them, "Why do you stand looking up towards heaven?" I try to imagine what they were actually looking at.

Dalí thinks they saw the dirty bottoms of Jesus' feet. And Jesus' hands in Dalí's painting? They aren't hands that are peacefully floating up to heaven. Those are hands that struggle, grasp, and yearn for God. I think they show the longing we all have planted in our hearts and souls because we fervently desire to come close to God. The Ascension highlights both that feeling of separation and the sense of presence that we simultaneously feel for God. Jesus is with us at the same time Jesus is far away.

This feeling of separation and connection is hard wired into us. It begins at birth and throughout our earliest years gets played out in our relationships with our parents and closest caregivers. Many of us are thinking about mothers today and it's most often in our relationship with our mothers that we develop a sense of safety, attachment, and love. It's called "attunement" and means our emotional and physical needs are recognized and met as infants and in later development. Some of us had wonderful mothers who were always there for us. Others of us had mothers who were distant or maybe even actively harmful. No matter what our mothers were like, we are made for love and connection. I think that's one reason we love our

¹ Thanks to DC Barroco's commentary on Dalí's painting:

<http://dcbarroco.blogspot.com/2013/05/understanding-ascension-through-art.html>

dogs and pets so much. Their unconditional love reminds us of that deep need. My dog is a leaner. She leans into my leg sometimes so hard, it's as if she wants to crawl inside me and meld. It's how much I desire to be close to God. Maybe you, too.

The Ascension is the mystery of Christ returning to the heart of God, to the source, to love. And Christ takes us with him, connects the space between humanity and the divine. Dali painted that yellow orb to represent the nucleus of an atom, what one blogger calls a sort of nuclear mysticism that was meant to represent the unifying nature of Christ. Dali also depicted a woman, his wife actually, who typically appeared in his religious paintings as the Mother Mary, or Mother of God. So we see Christ returning to the heart of God, the womb, the source of life.

If you heard me preach on Christmas Eve, you'll remember me talking about the miracle of birth and how many people, myself included, found that experience to be proof that God exists. When we think of Christ's birth at the nativity, we say that God became fully human in that event. Of all the doctrines and mysteries of Christianity, I think the nativity is one of the easiest to comprehend. God is so powerful, we believe God can become anything, even a human. But what the Ascension points towards is more difficult to swallow. Jesus brought our human nature into God. This completes the circle. God came into the world, but we also came into God. Think about that. I mean really think about what that means. Pulitzer Prize winning author Annie Dillard penned some great lines about this powerful reality:

“Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT.... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”²

It's one thing to believe God is among us. It's quite another to believe that we are part of God. That's a terrifying responsibility. The ascension points to the belief that our humanity is as much a part of God as God is a part of us. If we are truly part of God, other than donning crash helmets, what should we do? How should we act? What is our response?

Well, today's scriptures give us two hints for how we should respond. In the scene from Luke's gospel, immediately after the Ascension, the apostles return to the temple in Jerusalem to continually bless God. One ancient and still active spiritual discipline practiced by Jews is to offer 100 blessings each and every day. Jews are taught to start each day with thanking God for just waking up in the morning, then maybe being able to sit and stand up from bed, thanking God that they can use the bathroom effectively, thanking God for hot water to shower, for clothes to wear and a breakfast to eat. If you're paying attention, it's not that hard to find 100 reasons to be thankful or to bless God each day. How will you thank God this week?

² Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.

The other version of the Ascension story we heard was from the Book of Acts. If you were to read the section that follows what we have in our bulletins, you'd see that the apostles' immediate response to the Ascension was to go back to the upper room in Jerusalem and select the replacement for Judas. So what would that mean for us? I suggest it means going out into the world and working to complete a circle, whatever that circle may be. Mend fences in our family relationships, bring the lost sheep back into the fold, invite the odd duck to your next book group or hiking group, advocate or vote for a social policy that makes sure everyone is at the table and receives services, or do your internal work to notice what holes are in your psychological make up that have caused you trouble and address that.

Whatever you do, strap on your crash helmets and remember Dali's painting. May Christ's dirty feet be a reminder to do the hard work of reconciliation and community building. May the image of Christ's hands remind you that hands are made for blessing – give thanks to God and to others whose paths you cross, especially those who show you the maternal face of God. Christ brought our human nature into the very heart of God. We therefore have what Paul calls “the immeasurable greatness of God's power” (Ephesians 1:19) to do transformative things in this world and ultimately enact with confidence what we pray each time we say, “Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Amen.