

May 8, 2016

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John 17:20-26

²⁰"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Acts 1:1-11

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After 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. ⁴While 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; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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.”⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They 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.”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon: It's A Bird! It's a Plane!

Superman II has not aged well.

I don't believe this is a very controversial statement. If you disagree with me, then I need to ask, “When was the last time you watched *Superman II*?” If your answer has anything to do with a VHS cassette then I rest my case.

It's funny, though. The special effects in *Superman II* were considered revolutionary at the time. There was this engineer named Zoran who created the awesomely-titled “Zoptic Flying Rig” in the 1980, just in time for the movie.¹

And I don't want to get too far into the weeds here but essentially, every previous flying effect had been achieved by dangling actors from wires in front of screens or live sets. The Zoptic Flying rig was a whole different ballgame. It had cameras that spun on coordinated axes to capture the action.

Hence, when Superman flew low through the streets of Metropolis in pursuit of General Zod, audiences gasped as the realism of it. Nowadays, audiences still gasp at the film, but mostly because they can't believe how hilariously fake it looks.

¹ “Effects of Days Past: Making Superman Fly,” from the FXPhD production blog, www.fxphd.com.

Superman's body is weirdly rigid, his arm is frozen in front of him like the Statue of Liberty as he streaks across the sky. There is no relationship between the scenery and the flying figures. When Superman kicks General Zod into the Empire State Building, he ricochets like a pinball, his body barely registering the impact.

No, *Superman II* hasn't aged well, and it has everything to do with the flying. But while I was too young to watch it in the theater, I'm not so young that I can't remember *loving it* as a kid. It's funny to think about how effects that make us laugh today were breathtaking twenty years ago. It's not as though we had a looser grip on reality in the 1980's. We had seen the bird and the plane, after all, with our own eyes. So why did we accept such a fakey Superman? I think it's because movies and effects have grown so much more sophisticated over time that the techniques of earlier eras begin to distract from the power of the story.

I think we can all agree that there has not been a diminished interest in super heroes. But the standards of our craft have changed.

Today is Ascension Day in our calendar, commemorating the ascension of Jesus into heaven. It is a date acknowledged throughout the world church and a tradition that reaches back into antiquity. Saint Augustine, one of the church's earliest bishops, suggests that the Ascension Day was initiated by the apostles themselves. The historian Eusebius notes a Feast occurring as early as the fourth century.²

Technically, the Feast of the Ascension occurred this past Thursday, exactly forty days after Easter Sunday. The date comes from Acts 1:3, which notes that Jesus appeared to the disciples for forty days, before ascending into heaven.

Both our tradition and our Scriptures deem this a day of great significance. So why is it, then, that I cannot keep *Superman II* from my mind when I think about the ascension of Jesus? Perhaps it is because there is some kind of throwback quality to this moment when Jesus bids

² Eusebius, "Life of Constantine," IV.54.

farewell to the disciples and launches off into the sky. I want to approach the thought of it with reverence – I do. I want to see it in my mind’s eye like one the Tiffany windows – all glow and grace – or at least some slick CGI effect. But in my unguarded moments, I drift back to herky-jerky *Superman II*. It’s hard not to picture Superman holding Lois Lane in his arms, and she is wearing one of those terrible 1980’s pantsuits, and they are streaking through the sky in very straight line, like a line drive out of Camden Yards. And that image takes me right out of the spirit of prayer.

We struggle with the Ascension.

Surely cosmology is a part of the problem. The average Jew in Jesus’ lifetime would have held a three-level view of the world. Humans lived on the surface of the earth, until they died and descended into the underworld. Earlier generations of Jews regarded the underworld as a morally neutral and universal destination. But by the time of Jesus, the Greeks had helped introduce the notion of the underworld as a place of punishment. The guilty descend. Only the righteous would be reserved a place in the heavens.

So, if that was your worldview, it would seem logical that Jesus would take his exit vertically, returning with exaltation to his rightful place in the sky. Such a place is inevitably “up there.”

That story played very well in the ancient world. But now it comes off a little clunky, our very own doctrinal *Superman II*.

After Copernicus, after Galileo, after – well - the Wright Brothers, we struggle a little bit with the Ascension. Where did Jesus ascend *to*, after all, and why? Does he peer down at us now from some sort of box seat, taking notes and shouting advice?

The theologian Kenda Creasy Dean points out that most mainline Protestant churches celebrate Flag Day with more fanfare than Ascension Day. Which is to say, not very much. She says – and man do I

wish I had thought of this joke – that the church has “Ascension Deficit Disorder.”³

It is the legacy of our rationalist, post-Enlightenment culture to want to relegate the Ascension to the Fairy Tale section at Barnes and Noble, but are some good reasons, I think, to pause and reflect on why this moment so captured the imagination of the early church.

See we can't just toss out the parts of the story that make us uncomfortable. That's a dangerous game when you are playing with the Scriptures. But we can – and should – ask what we think the story is really trying to say. Because it may be that the crafting of it is distracting us from it's meaning.

It was Tolkien, of all people, who loved to talk about the truth of fairy tales.

J.R. Tolkien, of course, helped pioneer the world of fantasy with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In an essay called, “On Faerie Stories,” he writes that what makes fairy tales unique among the fantasy genre is that they explore ordinary human emotions under extraordinary circumstances. A truly excellent fairy tale, he wrote, is characterized by joy. “In such stories,” he writes, “when the sudden turn comes, we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through.”⁴

I love that quote and I think it describes very insightfully why so many people love *The Lord of the Rings*.

³ “Ascension Deficit Disorder: Youth Ministry as a Laboratory for Hope.” Lecture presented by Kenda Creasy Dean at the Princeton Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry, 2012.

⁴ [Michelson, Paul E., “The Development of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Ideas on Fairy-stories.” *Inklings Forever* 8 \(2012\)](#)

Tolkien believed that the Gospel story is deeply true in ways that bleed beyond the boundaries of our understanding. Such truths are difficult to state directly. So we lean on poetry and myth. We blink our eyes in order to better see.

The Book of Acts begins with the kind of tight synopsis that we've come to expect at the beginning of a new season of TV. "Previously on Game of Thrones," the narrator might say, before summarizing previous hours of storytelling. It's appropriate for the Book of Acts to begin this way, as it is truly a sequel of sorts to the Gospel According to Luke. The books are widely considered to be a unit, authored by the same person. In fact, were it not for the limitations of scrolls, they might have been a single text, "Luke/Acts."⁵

However, it's clear enough that Season 2 of "Luke/Acts" is going to be different. If the Gospels really revolve around the stories of Jesus Christ, Acts tells the story of what happened after Jesus left – essentially the birth of the church. We're pretty familiar with that narrative now, but it came as a bit of a surprise to the disciples. They've just lived through the life, death, and resurrection of their leader.

Wouldn't that be the logical place to end the show? The disciples certainly seem to think so. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" The answer, inevitably, is "Yes and No." "The timing is not for you to know," he replies. "But you will receive the Spirit. And you will receive power, and you will be my witnesses to the end of the earth."

And then, having given them their marching orders, Jesus departs. The stage is set for Season 2. It's a heckuva season premier.

See - everyone expected him to just do it – that's what powerful people do, right? Instead, Jesus gifts his friends with teaching and spirit and then leaves with the promise that while this story is not what they expected – this story ends with the transformation of the world.

⁵ "Feasting on the Word," Acts 1:1-11.

It may not, maybe, they were hoping for, but there's no denying that the disciples took it to heart. The church begins to spread across the region – and it's not without its drama – that's putting it mildly. But at its best, the Christian church becomes a community that's characterized by hope.

The hope is rooted in an understanding of who Jesus is, but the hope is also rooted in the conviction that however ambiguous the timeline, the story is not over.

In the end, I would argue that it is this hope, not Jesus' flying skills, that gives Ascension Sunday its staying power.

Kenda Dean writes that just like the other kind of A.D.D., Ascension Deficit Disorder leaves the church in a sort of perpetual and restless anxiety. When we reduce the notion of our future in Jesus Christ to the level of fantasy, "it shrivels our ability to practice hope." ⁶And practicing hope is one of the church's most powerful gifts.

It is essential here to distinguish Christian hope from hollow optimism, which the Church is also guilty of practicing. When we smile at a cancer patient and tell them everything is going to be fine, we are not practicing Christian hope, we are wallpapering over their suffering.

Dean writes that Christian hope is not just proclaimed. It has to be *demonstrated*. It has to be practiced. There is scientific data that people who are highly anxious use smaller and smaller percentages of their brain to make decisions. Surely the same is also true for systems and institutions. Surely the same is true for churches.

You can spot the church that practices Christian hope. It has nothing to do with their size, the eloquence of their pastor, or the power of their ministries. It's more about whether or not they've been able to set fear

⁶ "Ascension Deficit Disorder: Youth Ministry as a Laboratory for Hope." Lecture presented by Kenda Creasy Dean at the Princeton Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry, 2012.

aside and act as though God has got this thing in the end. They stare down uncertainty. They get into the mess.

One part of the process of being ordained in our denomination is a hospital chaplaincy. My chaplaincy internship ended up being in a locked psychiatric unit for teenagers in Boston. The unit was actually just a long, single, shiny hallway, with activity rooms on either end and single rooms for about fifteen patients.

They were there for various reasons, ranging from depression to anger to emerging personality disorders like schizophrenia. It was a strange vibe in that place, 50% sanctuary and 50% prison. Some of the young people were monitored 24 hours a day because they were a potential danger to themselves or others.

There was a guy there during my time, a sixteen year-old basketball player who had experienced a psychotic episode and assaulted another student in his school. Basketball was his life but it was unclear what his diagnosis would be and whether he would ever return to his school and his team.

This guy was always requesting to speak with a chaplain. At first I thought he was very religious but I came to understand that what he needed was an adult to accompany him on his walks up and down the hall. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, we would walk up and down the hall. He called it his conditioning. "When I get back to the team, I don't want to be completely out of shape," he explained.

Sometimes we had chaplain-type conversations. He asked me about my faith and had some questions about the Bible. He even asked me to bring him one, which I did. Most of the time, though, we just talked about everything and nothing. The point, I came to understand, was training for the team. The point was maintaining the belief that he would one day return.

I was thought about tempering his optimism, of course. I knew by then about the way the dreaded personality disorder diagnoses that could

shut a kid's life down before it started. I thought about the number of weeks left during the school year. But then I considered my own self. I was an openly gay candidate for ordination in a denomination that did not allow gay ordination. I was squeezing fifteen hours a week beyond my full-time job into this psychiatric unit to meet the requirements for the denomination that did not want to ordain me. So instead I said nothing and we walked together, two pilgrims, back and forth, back and forth, holding a space for hope.

See, when you believe in a God whose Good News bleeds beyond the boundaries of our understanding, you become a little bit of a hope-monger. You live in the real world, but you find ways to condition yourself, to leave a window cracked up. You keep an eye out for grace.

Because it happens. It happens again and again in small and subtle ways that feel like real life and still smack of the Holy. How awesome when the church becomes a place where we learn to live like people who have reason to hope.

I know we get a little squicky around words like "evangelism" and "witnessing." But to me it is very rarely more complicated than living a life that suggests that Good News is still possible.

I want to end this sermon with the two men in white robes. I love this part of the story because it's another thing that reminds me of Superman. In the Superman movies, right at that moment when he swoops in to awkwardly save a person hanging from a tower or whatever, some observer gets all wide-eyed and says, "It's Superman!" It's the cue that help in on the way.

What happens in our text is exactly the opposite. "Why are you staring into the sky?" they say, as Jesus appears as tiny as a figurine in the clouds. "The work is right here. The work is right now. We know how this ends. Let's get started."