

**Easter 7 (Ascension observed)**  
**May 15, 2018**

In the 1960's, the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci interviewed the American astronaut Wally Schirra:

*"How does it feel to be up there" she asked him. "How does it feel to be floating weightlessly up there?"*

*He shook his head slowly. "Feeling weightless... I don't know... You feel exquisitely comfortable, that's the word for it, exquisitely... You feel comfortable and you feel you have so much energy, such an urge to do things, such ability to do things. And you work well, yes, you think well, you move well, without sweat, without difficulty, as if the biblical curse, "in the sweat of thy face and in sorrow," no longer exists. As if you'd been born again."*

*"And when you come back to Earth, Mr. Schirra? ... how does it feel ... to come back to Earth? What's it like?"*

*"For me it's a great feeling of regret, a great sorrow. It starts when the retro rockets are about to fire and the time indicator shows how much time you still have left, and you're no longer weightless, and the dropping needle takes away your joy and restores your weight, your biblical curse... Zero zero; three zero minutes and zero zero seconds... Zero zero; one zero minute and zero zero seconds... It's robbing you of ... your exquisite lightness, ... and you can't do anything about it, and while you are still thinking, you can't do anything about it, there it's nearly at an end, there it's ending, there it's ended. While you're thinking that, you're back here on the Earth. No, returning isn't a sigh of relief. You can love the Earth with all the love in the world: Returning is regret, is sorrow."*

I have always loved this intriguing testimony from someone who was able, for a time, to escape the bonds of earth, to shed the weight of gravity and experience the levity of the heavens.

Do you think the Ascension was like that?

Do you think it was a relief for Jesus to shed the weight of earthly existence, to finally leave it all behind: the sweat and thirst, the labor and sorrow, of embodied life?

Sometimes, when life gets hard, it is tempting to think so, and there is no lack of theological endorsements for a strict dualism between heaven and earth, between human and divine. But the whole point of the incarnation, the embedding of God into the human condition, is to affirm the *union* of heaven and earth, not their separation. Christ did not come among us only to leave us behind in the end. And the Resurrection, far from dismissing embodied life as a prison

house, something we need to escape from, shows it to be worthy of eternal preservation and affirmation.

Then what *is* the meaning of this mysterious Ascension story, which is told only by Luke, by the way? None of the other gospel writers found it necessary to paint such a literal picture of Jesus' departure from the visible world. Since they did not go beyond the story of Jesus, they could conclude their account with him still around, not yet departed. Unlike Luke, they didn't go on to tell the story of what happened next, when Jesus was no longer present in the way he had been in his earthly ministry, or in the resurrection appearances, which themselves also came to an end.

But once those unique experiences did cease to occur, the early Church had to adjust to the physical absence of Jesus. And in order to tell *that* story, Luke needed to remove Jesus from the stage. So he showed him ascending into a cloud. It is a lovely image, an expressive and resonant vertical metaphor for transcendence.

But in his Ascension story, Luke doesn't provide the kind of detail expected of realistic narrative. He doesn't try to make us believe Jesus went away *just so*. No special effects required. It's simply "now you see him, now you don't." We've all watched the sun go away on a cloudy day. Maybe it was like that.

Luke might have had Jesus disappear around a corner, or over a hill. Or the disciples might have looked away for a moment, or blinked, missing the exact moment of vanishing. But the cloud is a nice touch. Artists have always loved it. In any event, Jesus is suddenly gone.

The essential part of Luke's story is not the *means* of Jesus' departure, but the *meaning* of his absence: *Where is he now, and will we ever see him again?*

In a sense, Jesus is always going away. Jesus never remains where we leave him. Not in the tomb. Not in the sky. Not in the Bible. Jesus comes to us out of the future, not the past. It may take time to recognize the way his body will look the next time we see him. It may look like a homeless man pushing his cart down the sidewalk, the exhausted mother carrying her baby, the victims of disaster and war on our televisions. It may look like the face in the mirror, or the ragtag band sharing bread and wine on a Sunday morning. It may look like the whole wide world.

If the Incarnate One had clung to the body of a first century Jewish male, God could have never become the rest of us. Without that body to keep us fixated on past appearances, we learn to see Christ everywhere. The absence following the Ascension creates an emptiness which God can fill with a new, expanded "body."

British theologian Graham Ward celebrates the Ascension as an image of the "transcorporeal" nature of Christ's body, which is always becoming something else, something larger, something more.

It can't be comprehended, grasped, pinned down or exhausted. Always pouring itself out, always being transfigured, it does not remain a discreet, locatable object that is "here" or "not here," lost from sight behind a cloud or kicking back in some place called heaven where we may venerate it from afar. "The specificity of his body is unstable from the beginning," writes Ward. "Jesus' body is extendible, can expand to incorporate other bodies, make them extensions of his own." In other words, his body is not erased by the cross, the tomb or the ascension. It is expanded. We ourselves become part of it, as we discover that our own bodies, instead of being the self-enclosure of solitary egos living in and for ourselves, are part of a larger, permeable, interdependent existence. Never complete in ourselves, we are inseparable from what is outside us and beyond us.

*Christ before us, Christ behind us, Christ under our feet,  
Christ within us, Christ over us, let all around us be Christ.*

If you want to see Jesus, don't stand looking up into the heavens. Just look around right where you are.

A few years ago, I read a story in *The Christian Century* magazine, describing a regional gathering of Lutherans that happened to fall on Ascension Day. The planning committee was trying to think of ideas for the liturgy, and someone suggested blowing out the Paschal Candle after the Ascension story was read. The Paschal Candle is first lit at the Easter Vigil. A cantor sings, "The Light of Christ," and everyone responds, "Thanks be to God!" This great candle then burns as a symbol of the risen Christ at every liturgy throughout the fifty days of Easter, ending with Pentecost Sunday. To blow it out before Pentecost would certainly be dramatic, but to make such a literal representation, as if the Easter presence were somehow being extinguished, would be not only be a little depressing but also very misleading.

Jesus did not vanish like smoke, never to return. He came again in the fire of empowering Spirit. And in the meantime, in the space between the Ascension and Pentecost, in that time of absence and waiting which every believer knows all too well, there is time to discover the new ways Christ is being manifested in our life together as the community and communion of God's friends. W. H. Auden said that when a writer dies, he becomes his readers. So we might say that when Jesus ascended, he became the Church- and even more than that, Jesus became *everything in the world whose name is love.*

And what about those Lutherans? What did they decide to do in that liturgy? The Paschal Candle was indeed extinguished after the reading of the Ascension gospel. But before this happened, just when the reader finished, a dancer entered, moving among the people with a collection of hand candles, lighting them one by one from the Paschal Candle, and offering them to each of the worshippers. Once everyone had a lighted candle, the dancer bowed before the Paschal Candle, and put it out. The smoke rose up and disappeared into the air. But the room remained full of light, as all those little flames flickered in the hands of the people.

The Light of Christ was not something they had watched *disappear*. The Light of Christ was something they themselves had *become*.

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