

Transcending Resurrection

Luke 24: 44-53

Jesus said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

I’ll never forget the old tv series *Highway to Heaven*, where the main character, an angel—played by Michael Landon—helps people transition to heaven. There was one episode where the character being helped was an actor in a play who wanted to finish his life with a grand finally. At the end of the play, the actor was supposed to be pulleyed up at the end of their performance. Except, when the final exit came, the pulley wasn’t working. So, of course, the actor was lifted up miraculously without the pulley system, which, to the audience was a just the end of the play, but to those of us watching was the end of his time on earth. I think of the episode as Jesus is carried off like a balloon into the sky at the end of his time on earth. Disciple’s heads torqued up as they stand their watching, waiting for some response. It is a grand exit. But how do we make sense of the bizarre ending to the gospel story?

Begin by contemplating the ascension. We don’t speak of it very often. It isn’t the most preachable topic. Jesus has been back for an extended stay after he’d been resurrected. He’s been opening their minds, showing them how to interpret the stories they all grew up listening to—explaining why the Messiah must suffer and rise after three days. He has been eating with them, drinking with them. And then he drops the news that there is more to come: more good news for the poor to be shared, more freedom for the oppressed to be unleashed, more caring for those who the system has tossed aside. But notice: in order for these promises to take place, Jesus has to go away. It’s interesting, isn’t it? In order for the disciples to begin to fulfill the mission of proclaiming repentance and forgiveness to all nations, and for them to be baptized by Holy Spirit, Jesus must no longer be there with them. It is as if in order for the next big thing to happen, Jesus has to transcend the previous reality.

Well, it’s how growth and development works. We must move beyond something in order to become something. For example, if we are going to be serious about loving our neighbor as the church, then it can no longer be my group against the world. Even though the impulse to protect our own may have served us well in the past by keeping our group alive and protecting ourselves against others who are a threat to us, at some point we have to transcend the impulsive thinking and grow beyond it if we are going to be people who love our neighbors. It doesn’t mean we don’t still have self-protective impulses, but we move through them—we transcend them. Or

perhaps we think about it this way: does anyone here want to go back to puberty? I certainly don't. I also don't have a problem with puberty. I am extremely grateful for going through it. Without it we wouldn't have gotten to the place we are today. Our spiritual journey works the same way. We may have grown up on a understanding of a god which excluded or judged people, but at some point that understanding of god was no longer helpful or true. So one of the keys to our development as people of faith is that while some things may have served us for a time—belief systems, traditions, or doctrines—at some point our growth requires for us to transcend it, to move beyond it, not by denying it, but by including it as part of our journey of becoming...and we are always, always becoming.

It is why Jesus so often, again and again, is showing the disciples that the Messiah must suffer as part of the resurrection. Because resurrection transcends death and suffering. In order for the new thing to happen, Jesus must transcend the previous thing. Not by replacing it, but by moving through it and ultimately beyond it.

Well, what would our world be like if we could ascend to this way of being? It would probably look like heaven, wouldn't it? Jesus says proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem. What if Jerusalem and Palestine could repent and forgive? One could argue that at one time long, long ago as civilization developed, it was believed that war was necessary. Maybe even that it was believed God had ordained it. (It's not what I believe but we can pretend.) But at some point, the retributive way only created more and more violence. And with each and every cycle of violence the animosity grew deeper and deeper. But what if? What if, they sat down and transcended the past wounds—not ignored it, or denied it—but listened to one another? I'm willing to bet the farm that if they could do it, what they would find is that they would begin to see part of themselves in each other. Their stories. Their longings. Their fears. Their hopes for their children.

Recently there was an incident at Parkland High School where a student slapped a teacher across the face twice. The horrible video has gone globally viral, which means it has now become political. Which means the system and all its layers of punishment take over; and now the 17-year old student is to be tried by the system for assault as an adult. While we all are clear that the student should be held accountable for his actions, a petition has been going around for Triad Restorative Justice to get involved so a new way of accountability and healing can take place for everyone. Where there is space for repentance and forgiveness so the victim can have healing, and the offender isn't throwing his life away.

This is the transcend art form of God's love, compassion, and justice: to look deep enough inside of someone else, trusting that at some point we are going to see ourselves so a new world can open up. It's why Jesus has to go away. So a new kind of world can open up. So we can stop only looking at him and begin looking at the Christ in each other. And what would the world look like, if both Palestine and Israel could see themselves in each other? What would the world look like if we could see ourselves in each other as well? Would it not look like true justice and healing? Would it not look like heaven on earth?

The truth is: it's going to take more than a sermon. It's going to take an act of God—which is what Pentecost is all about. It is going to take a Holy Spirit empowering us to be a paradoxical people who are both in the world but not of it.

So as Jesus floats off into heaven, he offers the disciples a blessing while they wait. A final blessing which is both for them and beyond them. And while we have no idea what Jesus said, I'm willing to bet the farm that it was something about being a people who could transcend the boundaries and rivalries of this world so a new way could open up. And wonder: what would the world look like if we could do it beginning here and now? Would it not look like heaven on earth?