

Ascension Of The Lord – Zach DiMiele

Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Imagine opening your eyes to see an explosion of primary colors—blues and yellows mostly. You notice a blinding patch of light in the middle. As your eyes begin to adjust to the brilliant light you begin to detect the warm colors suffusing the peripheries of this blinding image—oranges and reds and purples begin to dot the vision scape.

Your eyes adjust.

The blotches of colored lights have resolved into the ascending Lord Christ. His face seems to be made of light, and still blinds you if you look long enough. His head, haloed in the light of the rising sun, overlays the cross. His arms stretch out towards you, as if beckoning you to his warm embrace. His lower half is a whirlwind of grape and grain, as if Christ himself were the fruits of some bountiful harvest. This whirlwind issues forth from a figure to his right, robed and hooded in purple. It is issuing forth from the very womb of Mary, Mother of God. To his left is a dove descending and a John baptizing. In the background of all of this is a field of blue—water—though it remains unclear whether they are the waters of birth, of baptism, or the waters of creation itself. But as you ponder this image, that distinction somehow seems less meaningful than it did before.

This is the stained glass display in the sanctuary of the church my wife Amanda and I attend in Durham, NC. I wanted to share this image with you, as best I could, because I think that window does a better job preaching the Ascension of Christ than I ever could. So I'll be taking my cues here from the artist. For both the liturgical calendar and for the disciples, the Ascension is a bit of an enigma—I, at least, find it a puzzling intermediary between Easter and Pentecost. Easter Sunday was only a few short weeks ago, but now as we are in the last week of Easter Season, the last week to seasonably sing “Up From the Grave He Arose,” we may be wondering what's next.

Or so I found myself asking as I prepared for today.

I found it challenging to pinpoint what exactly is so important about the Ascension. Mostly, this is because I'm not really sure what the Ascension does. Obviously, it is important to those of us that recite it every week that Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again to judge the living and the dead. So I suppose this story is important for us to know that Christ remains bodily even to this day while we await his final victory. But I wanted to know what happened in these passages. I wanted to know what happened at the Ascension. Like with the Crucifixion or the Resurrection, I wanted to be able to articulate what was *accomplished* by the Ascension.

And so the significance of these passages eluded me. More questions than answers seem to result from my lines of questioning. But what continued to strike me was how, in true Gospel fashion, the disciples' expectation must have been completely flipped on their heads.

Perhaps the anti-climax of the Ascension is lost on those of us who live by the liturgical calendar; we come round to it every year and its strangeness is perhaps obscured by our familiarity with it. But it is this lack of strangeness that is, I suspect, the point of the Ascension. After all, nothing out of the ordinary really happens in these narratives—except for the actual Ascension, of course.

We may tend to think that the Ascension is not exactly small potatoes—certainly nothing to be skimmed over, like I just did. But there was so much more that the Ascension *could* have been, but wasn't. The Ascension is all-too-notably *not* when Jesus comes in power. It is all-too-notably *not* when God's final purposes seem to be revealed or fulfilled. It is all-too-notably *not* when the disciples achieve perfection in knowledge, faith and wisdom. Jesus has been revealing things to them, of course, but now as he is about to depart, he offers them only one final suggestion: Stay and wait for the Spirit that I will send you.

I have to imagine that this command, “stay,” was so much like when Jesus calmed the sea. I have to imagine the disciples, chomping at the bit, just amped up and ready to go, itching to witness to this miraculous thing that had been revealed to them. The chaos would have surely been formidable. But like those choppy waters on that stormy night, Jesus orders them to stay their hands, belay their actions. Wait. Stay. Pray. Worship. Listen. They are not ready yet. If they leave now, they will be nothing more than waves dashing beleaguered boats upon a meagre sea. They have yet to become those floods we spoke of earlier: *The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. More majestic than the thunders of the mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea ...*

The disciples start out thinking that now is the time for a call to action; instead they get a call to worship. The Ascension is a call to worship. But it is the kind of worship that is the real stick-in-the-craw of our expectations. It is how little worship seems to actually *accomplish* that should ruffle our feathers.

Recall that window now. The resplendent Ascending Lord, caught up in that whirlwind of grape and grain, resting on that field of blue. That image is an image of the life of the church!

Those waters offer us life, and life abundantly. And indeed, the waters of birth, of baptism and of creation itself are no different. They are the waters that ran through Eden; they are the very waters that bore Noah to safety and Moses to a new life. They are the same waters that flowed in the river Jordan and baptized a people. Those are the waters of Jesus' own baptism and ours. They are the floods that lift up their voice, and they are the waters that flowed when his side was pierced on the cross and that flow from the heavenly throne through all history. They are the waters of life, and it is back to these waters that Jesus bids his disciples go, and wait.

Those grapes and that grain are in fact the body and blood of Christ—the very same body that was broken on the cross and raised from the grave. It ascended to heaven and sits on the right hand of the Father, from whence he will come to judge the living and the dead. But he also broke bread one night, and he called it his own body. That body lays before you right now, wrapped up as if in swaddling clothes newly born, or is it a burial shroud, waiting to be lifted? That body, *this* body, has been shared by people of faith for millennia. And it is to this simple meal of grape and grain that Jesus bids his disciples go, and wait.

So we too follow in their footsteps, wading in their wake. We remember our baptisms and we will all share in this Holy Meal shortly. But just as the disciples were told to stay, in order that they might wait upon the Lord, unable to effect for themselves the coming of the Spirit, so too do we stay here, worshipping the best ways we know how.

The sacraments are so central to the life of the Church because the Church believes in the unique role that God plays in them—namely, that God is the one doing basically all the work. In the early church, a group of heretics called the Donatists claimed that sacraments were never valid if performed by priests who later recanted their faith under persecution. This instilled a panic, and Christians began soliciting multiple baptisms to ensure that at least one of them would “take.” Thankfully, this was called heresy; enough Christians understood that, in the sacraments, it is God who blesses, not the priest. So when I consecrate the elements for the first time in a few minutes, nobody has to worry. It will definitely be the body and blood of Jesus that you are given, because regardless of how green a pastor I am, it is God who makes God’s self present in this meal, not me. No matter how sinful we think we might be, it is God’s worthiness that matters in the sacraments, not our own.

This is uncomfortable, though. We like to think about grace and salvation in connection with holiness and completely separate from sin.

G.K. Chesterton has written a poem, and I think he captures well the attitude many may bring to this tension. Water, as he takes from the flood story, is a curse—it’s the wrath of God, poured out on the unrighteous. Thus, his refrain, “as long as the water doesn’t get into the wine.” Here is just the last stanza, if you’ll forgive some of the more obscure expressions of a 19th century Englishman:

But Noah he sinned, and we have sinned; on tipsy feet we trod,
Till a great big black teetotaller was sent to us for a rod,
And you can't get wine at a P.S.A., or chapel, or Eisteddfod,
For the Curse of Water has come again because of the wrath of God,
And water is on the Bishop's board and the Higher Thinker's shrine,
But I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get into the wine.

(Normally I would recommend Chesterton without reservation. However, here I think he has missed the point somewhat dramatically, but at least he also missed the point instructively.) None of us likes the idea of getting our sins mixed in with our holiness. These are two things that need to be cordoned off, kept in their own separate parts of the world. “I don’t care where the water goes if it doesn’t get into the wine.” But here is the tricky bit: the wine went and got in the water! The blood and the water flowed side-by-side from that side of Christ. That curse of water was taken on and redeemed by exactly that mixing that is the Incarnation, a Jesus who is fully God and fully human. Chesterton may want to keep his water and wine separate, but Jesus won’t let him keep it that way for long.

This the work of the sacraments. This is the work of Christ. Jesus sends his disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit to clothe them, but the grace of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, is not a merit. We cannot earn it. We don’t keep chugging away at our own spiritual lives until one day we’ve suddenly achieved perfection. The commands of Jesus at his Ascension indicate that there is very little we are able to do ourselves to bring about the kingdom. In fact, there is nothing we can do to bring about the Kingdom. That’s not our job.

Oh we will go out and witness. We will do works of righteousness and live holy lives of witness to the world. We will testify to the nations and we will do even greater things than these. God’s Spirit will clothe us with power from on high. We will become those floods, lifting up our voices to the majesty of the ascending Lord. But that’s next week.

For now, we stay. We wait. We pray. We eat and we drink.