

ASCENSION, THE DATA INTERPRETED©

Rev. Jim Ryan, PhD -- jimryan6885@gmail.com
Co-pastor of Mary of Magdala, Apostle to the Apostles Community
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The Ascension of Jesus Christ appears three times in Scripture. The Gospels of Mark and Luke refer to it. And the Book of Acts (1:1-11) relates the event as we heard in the 1st Reading this morning. Whatever or however it occurred and whether you or I believe at any level of certain fact – this story of the Resurrected Jesus appearing and then permanently disappearing is at the core of Christian faith. To have a relationship with Christ, it seems to me, includes inheriting this and other stories that make up the basic data of experience of those who believe in Christ.

Ascension is, as I said, at the core of the experience of the first followers of Jesus Christ. And that is the first point I want to make. It is that the data of experience matters.

Now, the second point starts with the fact that these core events happened only once. As with all experience once it happens everything else is about interpretation. For example, it didn't take long for the first communities to interpret the message of Jesus Christ as a universal one based upon the mission he gave them, "Go out to all the world..." In today's 2nd Reading from Ephesians we get that view already in Paul's interpretation that Jesus Christ is above all other "sovereignty, authority, power, or dominion."

But let's remember that all this interpretation is based upon experience, and experience that happened only once. The first followers of Jesus are the only ones who had no idea that there are 10 days between Ascension and Pentecost (actually, the 10 day thing is likely a random choice made while constructing the liturgical cycle). What I mean to say here is that this faith we share is based upon the actual life of a person and not a myth. Whatever those followers experienced was a one-time one. And those experiences serve as the data points of all that follows. This is at the core of what constitutes Christian faith.

It may be uncomfortable trying to explain these events that happened only once, for example, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost. But if I explain them away by way of an interpretation that they are mere stories (archetypes, perhaps) but they don't relate to real experience then, it seems to me, I lack the courage to acknowledge, as Bonhoeffer wrote, that Christ is the Center of History. (Remember Bonhoeffer was a reader, if not full-out devotee of Karl Barth who certainly believed that Jesus is the Christ and Christ is Jesus.....)

My point is, as I raised last week, our faith requires the courage to uphold the coincidence of opposites (something (I came by way of Richard Kearney and he by way of Nicholas of Cusa). In this case of Ascension the opposites are the first followers'

experience of the resurrected Jesus who appeared and then disappeared (otherwise we really are the descendants of body-snatchers) balanced or in tension with the interpretation of this Christ who is the One who is over all, above all, through all, and in all. The data of experience must inform and coexist with the interpretation of this faith. It is every philosopher's dream that what they think actually relates to what humans experience. Our Christian faith has the experience of Jesus Christ at its core or it only has nice stories that provide ethical guidelines.

Here's what I am not saying. I'm not saying that the stories of the New Testament are literal retellings of actual experience. I'm not saying that what others have preserved in the Canon is a factual historical record of what happened. We have learned too much about historical consciousness to even think these things. And finally, I am not saying that interpretation of these events must ultimately become speculations separated from history. That would be every philosopher's nightmare (well, most anyway.) The point is interpretation participates with experience in the creation of a story, a narrative as Paul Ricoeur taught us. The one – interpretation – requires the other – experience.

The experience of the first followers of Jesus Christ is the data set of their faith. Just so is it ours. Having this in mind we Christians trust the data of experience. We trust those who also believe in and do their work with the power of data based experience. To rely merely on interpretation apart from the data of experience is not only risky it places action in the hands of those who quite possibly have only their own interests in mind.

When the current occupant of the White House – quite apart from the data of experience – declares that all houses of worship must be opened immediately, based upon his faulty interpretation of the powers of his office, then we Christians have this to ask.

In what mind game of narcissistic imagery that makes you a Gilbert & Sullivan-esque impotent potentate are you participating?

No, we whose history includes courageous followers of the man who, post-resurrection, appeared and then disappeared, followers who, pre-disappearance, were given a mission – we will not go willy-nilly into houses of worship with their large crowds..

At this time of covid as we anticipate the renewal of the Spirit's gifts we will rely on data and the interpretation of knowledgeable and skilled professionals before we regather for worship.

We experience Jesus Christ, in part, based on the testimony of others. We share faith in the meaning of the mission we have received from the One whom his followers loved and whom we follow. And we will regather when those who responsibly apply data to advice say we can. After all data based experience is in our theological DNA.

A Prayer

O God, we, the en-Christed ones, come from your creation
and go to our fulfillment in you.
On the way, with you being the core of our lives,
we grow in the consciousness of your gifts
of all creatures, especially the human, animal, and plant ones,
of Earth, our common home, and
of all stars, galaxies, and the seemingly endless light
to the farthest reaches of the universe.
Loving Christ, renew your Spirit in us that we may share this experience
and spread faith which gives hope.
Be for us fire and light, now and in the age to come. Amen. (JR)

Litany for Ascension to Pentecost

Christ is over all, in all, and through all.
Christ lives in cosmic wonder.

Our brother and messiah loves us to the end and beyond.
Christ, hold us in your loving arms.

The Word is Spirit alive in us.
Come, Spirit and renew our childish wonder.

The divine journey has no beginning, no end.
On this Way - we are to love, to forgive, to bring peace. Amen.