

ASCENSION?

Luke 24:44-53

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on Ascension of the Lord, May 13, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Passage

Then he 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 worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Prayer: O Christ who sits at the right hand of God, I speak and we hear the words of this sermon in the interval between the dawning of the new order of life and our period in which the temporary and material has not yet been transformed into the spiritual. In this interval, in this meantime, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you and may they point to the new order of life and its victory to come. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. (Richard Niebuhr, alt.)

It was the 1964 World Series between the St. Louis Cardinals and New York Yankees that got me hooked on baseball. On Saturday, October 10, our whole family happened to go shopping for what in those days was known as a “second car.” Not even the prospect of climbing in and out of clean, used cars to try out their back seats and could pry my nine-year-old self away from my seat in the yellow Mercury station wagon which was our first car and in which I sat in the dealer’s parking lot listening to Cardinal announcer Harry Carey call Game Three from Yankee Stadium, with the series tied one game apiece. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Yankee slugger Mickey Mantle told Elston Howard not to bother going to the on-deck circle to await his turn to hit, for Mantle said that he was going to hit a home run and win the game. Within minutes Mantle hit the first pitch from Cardinal knuckleballer Barney Schultz into the right field seats giving the Yankees, who were *not* then my team, a 2-1 victory and a 2-1 lead in the series.

About the time the game ended, my parents emerged with the keys to a two-year-old beige Ford Falcon – which had neither a radio nor air conditioning – into whose back seat I slid dejectedly. But five days later, my sorrow turned to joy when the Cardinals won the seventh game of that famous series.

Years later, when I went to seminary in New York, my allegiance switched to the then Billy Martin/Reggie Jackson/Thurman Munson led Yankees, an allegiance that has stayed with me ever since, providing me instant alienation from most members of churches I have served. That allegiance has been eclipsed – but only by a smidgeon – when the Nats arrived in DC a few months after I moved to Alexandria.

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With baseball being part of my blood, leading me to build this sermon around it *even* on Mother’s Day, this past Wednesday night, when leaving a committee meeting, one of our members mentioned that he has part time job performing random tests on major league players before games at Nats stadium, I couldn’t let that information pass without following him into the church parking lot to excise every detail I could from him.

As many of you know, I have a keen interest in and respect for the work many of you do in campaigns and polling and lobbying and journalism and think tanks and teaching and defense and foreign policy and intelligence and service on the Hill or in the executive branch, but Wednesday night none of this seemed as interesting to me as the chance to talk to someone who actually tests players before major league games.

As I completed my questioning of him and began walking home, I saw the lighted sign on the marquis, reminding me that I was preaching this Sunday on the Ascension, the phrase from the Apostles' Creed we recite nearly every week:

He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty

I began to plot how I could work the baseball story I had just heard into the sermon I was planning to preach.

So here goes.

I.

Growing up as a child in the Presbyterian Church and even well into the first decade or so of my ministry, the Resurrection of Christ and his Ascension into heaven were joined as one event in my mind. After all, we say them one after another:

*On the third day, he arose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,
And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*

Thus, I would preach a sermon on Easter about the hope and promise the Resurrection holds for us and for our world. The pews were filled. Spring was in the air (except in Iowa!). Lilies were in bloom. Baseball had already started or was starting soon. Everyone was upbeat. But on that and subsequent Sundays, I never really got to the Ascension.

In fact, just this week I was reminded that the Ascension only happens in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, which were written by the same person. I also realized that in Luke, there is a significant time lapse – forty days – between the time Christ is raised from the dead and the time he ascends into heaven. If we combine all four gospels, we conclude that during those forty days, the risen Christ

- Gives the Great Commission to his disciples in Matthew¹
- Appears to two disciples on the Road to Emmaus in Luke²
- Shows disciples his hands and side in John and eats with them by the Sea of Tiberias.³

Piecing all this together, it becomes clear that the Ascension is an event *separate from* the Resurrection of Christ, but an event that gets easily lost in the rites of spring.

But the sermon title on the marquis read “Ascension” with a question mark. What does the Ascension mean?

II.

As I thought about it this week, my initial thought this week was that in the Ascension, Christ departs this world so that we may live fully in it on his behalf. In this way of thinking:

- Christ came and lived among us, teaching, preaching, healing
- After his death, he was raised, and appeared to his disciples for forty days
- Then just as Elisha picked up the mantle of Elijah when Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven,⁴ we fully and freely pick up Christ's mantle of responsibility for the world as he ascends into heaven.

It was thus going to be a sermon on the tremendous gifts of freedom in and responsibility Christ entrusts to us.

III.

But then I turned to my former teacher and friend, Christopher Morse, and re-read some of what he had written on the Ascension a few years ago.⁵

Morse writes that while ascended, Christ now resides in heaven, seated at the right hand of God, *but...*

¹ Matthew 28:16-20.

² Luke 24:13-49.

³ John 20:19-29; 21:1-25.

⁴ II Kings 2:1-25.

⁵ Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, Second Edition (New York: Continuum, 2009), 159-161.

- Christ is *not* absent from the affairs of the earth
- Christ has *not* retired from matters of state and nation, family relationships, economics, politics, business or law
- Christ is *not* on sabbatical, vacation, sick or family leave.

Rather, after the Ascension, says Morse, Christ's *base* of operation has returned to heaven, but his *field* of operation remains on earth. In fact, Christ operates on earth *with* us and *through* us – or as Whitney often points out in her prayers, “when and where necessary *despite* us” – in the midst of the kingdoms of

- Self and Family
- Culture, Community, Church
- Vocation
- Government of nation and nations
- Indeed, civilization itself.

Christ has *ascended* to rule all these kingdoms with his power, power which is *greater than* the power within these sometimes *threatening* and sometimes *enriching* kingdoms in which we live and move and have our being.

The writer of Ephesians describes the scope of the ascended Christ's power:

*Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, Not only in this age but also in the age to come.*⁶

Ascension is a vindication of the will and way of Jesus Christ in relation to all existing power structures *in* and *under* which we live. Ascension serves as a *defiance* of any claim they make to be more powerful than he is.

- Ascension is not just Christ defying gravity in some mystical, visually dramatic way.
- Ascension is not just an event in the sky, like a solar eclipse or Northern lights we might be drawn to watch on a summer night.
- Ascension is not just Christ rising into thin air or levitating above earth.

Ascension fulfills in Christ the promise of Isaiah so often associated with his birth and sung so well in Handel's *Messiah*:

*Authority rests upon his shoulders...⁷
The kingdom of the world
Has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ
And he will reign forever and ever.⁸*

That is the meaning of Ascension.

IV.

Now back to baseball.

As many of you know, our national pastime experienced significant labor and management disputes in the early 1990s.

- Strike shortened seasons of 1994 and 1995 left fans without a World Series in the Fall of 1994.
- After the strike settled, revival came to the national pastime through with the slugfests of 1998-2001, when Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, and Barry Bonds took turns soaring past Roger Maris' record of 61 home runs in a single season, a record that had stood for 37 years.
- Yet the integrity of the revival was soon called into question with the discovery that those home run surges were fueled by performance enhancing drugs.

Hence, today's drug testing program in which our member plays a part every time he goes to test players prior to a game at Nats Stadium.

⁶ Ephesians 1:21.

⁷ Isaiah 9:6.

⁸ Revelation 11:15.

Can you imagine the *intensity* and *degree* of negotiation involved in the early 2000s to put this drug testing program into such a major industry as major league baseball?

Some of you may have been involved in it.

- Owners
- Players
- Lawyers and agents
- Congressional committees
- Sponsors and media companies
- Companies that sell jerseys and hats and balls and bats and memorabilia authorized by baseball
- Companies that sell hot dogs and pretzels and beer and soft drinks at games
- Ushers and parking lot attendants and security guards who work the games
- Cities that receive tax revenue from ticket sales and concessions
- Developers who put up condos and offices, restaurants and entertainment venues near stadiums.

All were affected by the decline and renewal of the national pastime. *All* had a stake in the negotiations around the testing and regulation of performance enhancing drugs.

Like nearly everything else that touches our lives or invites us to give our time and energy, major league baseball is a “kingdom of this world,” no different than medicine or law or education or government or business or the arts or entertainment. *All* are kingdoms of this world.

In a way, the Ascension of Christ says *none* of these kingdoms matter at all. Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, rendering relative at best, irrelevant at worst, all the kingdoms in which we live and for which we extend energy and labor. Part of us even wants the ascended Christ to render them irrelevant.

But in another way, the Ascension of Christ says that *all* of these kingdoms matter, because ascended into heaven and seated at the right hand of God, Jesus Christ is still involved in the world for which he was born, suffered, and died. Though he is *transcendent* from us and our kingdoms, he remains present still *to us* and *with us*, *to our kingdoms* and *with our kingdoms*. He is *with* through his Spirit, more powerful than these kingdoms in which we live and work. Christ is neither *defined* by them nor *contained within* them, but he stands *with us* as we live in them, seeking to bear witness to his grace and power, which we believe are greater than all the kingdoms of the world.

With Morse, we

Refuse to believe
That the *transcendence* of Jesus Christ
Does not have anything to do
With *actual governance in all its forms*
Of our earthly power relations
And...authority.

Whether we test baseball players or nuclear weapons, whether we live in families simple and peaceful for the moment or always seeming to be fractious and complex, whether we work in causes or corporations, politics or pre-school, the Christ who was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, has triumphed over all we do, and yet stands *with us* as we stand *with him* in these earthly kingdoms that await their transformation into his Kingdom.

All authority rests on his shoulders...
The kingdom of the world
Has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ
And he will reign forever and ever.

Therefore, when the umpire calls out “Play Ball,” the game begins, and we are in it.

Amen.