

“The Problems and Promises of Ascension”
 Easter 7A/Ascension Sunday (May 24, 2020) - **COVID-19 (Sunday 11)**
 Scripture: Psalm 68:4-10, 32-35; Ephesians 1:15-21; Luke 24:44-53
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

New York Times reporters and editors have been sifting through millions of photographs archived in their card catalog over the past two years for a project titled “Past Tense.”¹ Their research led to a surprising discovery. Here’s how the reporters and editors put it: “when we started going through the millions of photos . . . , we noticed something puzzling. In one of our files, Frida Kahlo was identified as ‘Mrs.’ Diego Rivera. In another, Ray Eames’ name was scrawled in pen next to her husband’s, which was typewritten. When we went looking for pictures of June Carter Cash,” they write, “the card catalog directed us to ‘Cash, Johnny & Mrs.’ . . . On many cards for Coretta Scott King, . . . her name was typewritten over a splotch of white-out, covering her husband’s name. Coretta Scott King was originally archived in the card catalogue as “King, Rev. Martin Luther Jr. & Mrs.” For nearly a century, married women in *Times* articles were called by their husband’s names: “Mrs. John F. Kennedy, for instance, or Mrs. Frank Sinatra.” “The *Times*,” say the reporters and editors, “like much of society, almost reflexively referred to women using the construction ‘Mrs. Husband’s Name.’”

In 1932, Amelia Earhart, famous pilot and author, wrote to the *Times* to complain that she was called “Mrs. George Putnam” in *Times* articles. She forcefully requested that the paper call her by “her professional name” and not her husband’s name. And she went further, asking the *Times* to refer to both she and her husband by *her* name! In her letter she wrote, “[I]t is for many reasons more convenient for both of us to be simply “Amelia Earhart’.” The *Times* did as she asked.

As many of you academics out there know, research for one project can clear brush and open trails that take you in an entirely new direction. After discovering that women in their own archives and past articles were known by their husband’s names, *Times* editors and reporters began work on another project titled “The Mrs. Files,” which explores the history of honorifics. It’s in print in last Sunday’s paper. They’ve discovered that it wasn’t until “the 19th century [that] the ‘Mrs. Husband’s Name’ form develop[ed].” It was considered a new fashion at the time, and by the turn of the century it was the widely accepted norm. But not for Amelia Earhart. And not for suffragist Lucy Stone. Before she married Henry B. Blackwell in 1855, she told him in a letter, “My name is my identity and must not be lost.” Lucy Stone kept her own name. After vigorous internal debate in the 1970s between its mostly male editors, and after protestors picketed outside its doors, *The New York Times* officially began referring to women by their own names as “Ms.” in 1986. People sent them appreciative flowers, and Gloria Steinem paid them a congratulatory visit.²

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/arts/mrs-women-identity.html>

²

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/reader-center/examining-the-meaning-of-mrs.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>

The New York Times has uncovered here something that linguists have known for a while: how we use words to describe people and things changes over time. What seems avant-garde in one era - like referring to married women by their husbands' names - seems downright oppressive in another era. Our language changes. What's beautiful to me about the Bible is that it provides millennia-old language to think with (to borrow wording from anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss); and the Bible provides millennia-old language to make meaning with (to borrow wording from scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith). The Bible is *a place to start*, as we say in the UCC, not the final word. Some of the Bible's ancient language has stood the test of time - words like cross, spirit, grace, faith, prayer, hymn, fellowship, stewardship, peace, and many others. But some ancient words and phrases from the Bible and Christian tradition don't hold up as well over time. The word "ascension" comes to mind.

Today is Ascension Sunday on the church calendar - the last Sunday of the Easter season; the Sunday before Pentecost, which is next week. The story of Christ's ascension is told by Luke in today's gospel reading. After giving his followers a few final instructions - instructions about how to read scripture, instructions about the message they would deliver to the nations - and after he blessed them one final time, Jesus, says Luke, "withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." He ascended. The image of Christ heading upward - elevator-like - is one of the stranger ones in Christian history. Artists have had a field day painting it. Giotto's 14th century depiction shows Christ floating upward accompanied by two angels as the disciples kneel piously on the ground. All of their heads are ringed with halos. One 16th century German painting of the ascension just shows Christ's feet and the disciples gazing up at the sky - the painting has been called "Disappearing Feet." In the 17th century, Rembrandt depicted Christ in glowing white robes being lifted to the sky by tiny cherubs as the disciples watched dumbfounded from below. The ascension also appears in illuminated manuscripts and reliefs from the medieval period, and in Christian architecture. The central dome of Saint Sava Cathedral in Belgrade is a mosaic of the ascension. It weighs 40 tons, and it's the members of the congregation who have to look up from the sanctuary floor to watch Christ ascend. One recent tweet about the ascension made me chuckle. There's a dude on Twitter who goes by the name "Jesus Christ," and yes, I follow him. I do follow Jesus...on Twitter. Back in March he tweeted an 18th century depiction of the ascension where Christ seems to be leaping into the sky. The tweet next to the painting said, "I'm not leaving, I'm just social distancing."³

The ascension of Christ is such an extraordinary event in the ancient Christian imagination that it practically begged to be depicted in art. A haloed Jesus floating upward; the feet of Jesus disappearing into the sky; a glowing Jesus lifted up by tiny cherubs; a Jesus mosaic high above a sanctuary floor; an ascending Jesus leaping into the sky; even Twitter talks about the ascension. The ascension was important enough to appear several times in the New Testament, and to be included in the 4th century Apostles' Creed: *he ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty*, says the ancient creed. And the ascension was important enough that it is narrated twice in the two New Testament books that Luke wrote: our text for today in the Gospel of Luke (volume I) and in the book of Acts (volume II). The ascension appears in art and creeds, in hymns and illuminated texts, in Christian architecture and several times in the New Testament.

³ <https://twitter.com/JesusOfNaz316/status/1239598945837309953/photo/1>

And yet, from our modern vantage point, it's a strange story. The word ascension hasn't held up as well over time as words like cross, spirit, grace, faith, prayer, hymn. Ascension assumes things about the structure of the cosmos that space exploration has made us rethink. There is no dome of sky above which is the heavenly realm that one goes *up* to enter - there is only a vast universe with billions of galaxies and billions of stars. In his book *When Jesus Came to Harvard*, Divinity Professor Harvey Cox talks about the struggles he had trying to teach undergraduates about the ascension.⁴ When he showed them medieval paintings of "the disciples gazing upward, jaws agape, at a pair of feet disappearing into the cloud[s]," some students would giggle. Like older language that referred to married women by their husband's names, the language and imagery of ascension - so important in the Christian past - "can cause," says Cox, "confusion and even evoke derision" today. "We desperately need a new language" to describe the ascension, he writes.

I wonder if this "new language" can be found in the world of art. I like to think of Bible stories as works of art. And what does art do? Films, paintings, sculptures, poems, novels, Netflix or Hulu shows, music, New Testament gospels - art can pull us into another world, offer us another way of seeing, inspire us, fill us with joy. Maybe the ascension is not a literal story, but a colorful painting meant to inspire and exude joy. I think it's interesting that after Jesus departs in today's story, the disciples were filled with joy. Their hearts grew larger instead of smaller. They were inspired as if they'd gazed at a stunning work of art. Maybe they were joyful because the mission of Jesus would now be their and *our* mission. Maybe they went back to Jerusalem filled with joy, inspired, with larger hearts because they knew that instead of spending their days following Jesus around and watching what *he* did, *they-we* would now be carrying on his mission. Instead of watching *him* embrace outsiders - the Greeks and the Samaritans, the Canaanites and the Syrophoenicians, the tax collectors and the sinners - *they-we* would now be doing the embracing. Instead of watching *him* care for the neediest - the blind and the poor, the hated and the despised, the broken and the last in line - *they-we* would now be doing the caring. Instead of watching *him* teach people about God's love, *they-we* would now have the chance to tell every person *him* that they are loved by God. And instead of watching *him* love a neighbor, *they-we* would now have the chance to embody this love. Maybe the disciples in Luke's painting of the ascension were filled with joy at the chance to make a difference in their world. They now had the chance, as Richard Rohr writes, "to announce [and embody] ... a new way of living based on faith instead of fear, peacemaking instead of moneymaking, community instead of competition," loving neighbors instead of hating them.⁵

In her book *Holy Envy*, Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the challenge and the joy of taking on Christ's mantle.⁶ "In my religious language," she writes, "there is no loving God without loving other human beings If I could make my neighbors up," she says, "I could love them in a minute. ... But nine times out of ten these are not the neighbors I get. Instead, I get neighbors who cancel my vote, burn trash in their yard, and shoot guns so close to my house that I have to wear an orange vest when I walk to the mailbox. These neighbors I did not make up knock on my front door to offer me the latest issue of *The Watchtower*. They put things on their church signs that make me embarrassed for all Christians everywhere. They text while they drive, flipping me off when I pass their

⁴ Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Choices Today* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 287, 293.

⁵ Richard Rohr, *What the Mystics Know: Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self* (New York: The Crossroad, 2015), 137.

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), 194-200.

expensive pickup trucks on the right, in spite of the fish symbols on their shiny rear bumpers. [But still I'm called to love them, she says, because Jesus loves them.]” He loved all the wrong people, the people who drive us nuts, the people who are different, the people who seem like they're from a different planet. Jesus loved “Romans [and] Samaritans [and] Canaanites [and] Syrophenicians - people who worshiped other gods or worshiped the same one he did in an unorthodox way.” Jesus loved the strangers. “Have you ever wondered,” asks Barbara Brown Taylor, “how [Jesus] knew people were strangers from a distance? ... [I]t was probably the same way [we] do: by their hair, their skin, their clothing ... , [the people we call] ‘those people.’” Jesus loves “those people,” she writes.

“A few summers ago,” she continues, “I agreed to meet a friend in the French countryside for a couple of days. I made my first flight, missed the second one, had the next one canceled due to weather, and finally landed at my destination close to midnight. The car rental agency was open for another fifteen minutes, which gave the clerk time to ask me if I could drive a stick shift, hand me the key to a compact car, and wish me. ‘*Bon voyage.*’ Then she locked up the office and left, while I sat in the dark parking lot trying to figure out how to get the voice on the GPS to speak English instead of Czech. When I could not do so, I used my cell phone instead, though I had not signed up for international coverage and would pay dearly for it later. It seemed like a miracle when my American phone led me directly to the French road that I needed to be on. Then I came to the toll plaza. Since it was midnight, the only lanes that were open were the automated ones requiring euros I did not have. There was no credit card option. My only two choices were: 1) back up on the expressway, pull over to the side of the road, and wait until morning; or 2) crash through the barrier and see what happened next. [Mercifully, ...] I saw a shadow move in the far left booth. I backed up the car and drove straight over there to see if my eyes were playing tricks on me - but no! It was a real person, sliding back the glass panel of his dark little booth to look down at me with utter disdain. He said something that almost certainly meant, ‘What is your problem, lady?’ but since I stopped speaking French in high school, I could not answer him. I held out a handful of US quarters instead, piled on top of the hundred-euro note I got from the airport ATM, making the most universal sounds of distress I could manage. It was all my fault, and we both knew it, but he still took pity on me, sliding the hundred-euro note out from under the quarters and coming back moments later with all the change I would need for this toll booth and the others that lay ahead. ‘Thank you!’ I said. ‘God bless you!’ I said, forgetting that France is a secular country. ... [He] nodd[ed] his head toward the open lane in front of me. ‘You go now,’ he said ... , making a motion with his hand that meant ‘shoo’ in any language, and I did - though I will never forget the kindness of this particular stranger. ... I [share this story, writes Barbara Brown Taylor] because even something that slight, that frivolous, can come back to mind in some other place, at some other time, when you see another stranger who appears to be lost and in need of help. When that happens, ... you can decide to pull open your sliding glass door and do what you can, however small a gesture it may be [And] when th[at] stranger turns to you with a look of disbelieving gratitude on his face, it matters very much.”

...Taking on the mantle of Jesus after his dramatic departure is both really hard and really simple. It's hard because it challenges us to love people who are different. But it's also simple because a small gesture goes a long way. Amen.

Announcements

**Flowers are to celebrate the birth of Adelaine Sierra Koch, daughter of Maura Grainger Koch and her husband Jim, and granddaughter of Brad and Mary Grainger.

Maura rhymes with Laura

Adelaine is like Adelaide with an 'n'

Koch is like Coke

**Anne's presentation [how to join?]

**Next Sunday: two things happening - 1) Confirmation; 2) Esther's presentation

**Outreach announcement