

Christ Who Fills the Universe

Ephesians 4:10

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June 5, 2001

Some of you must think it's strange to make a big deal about the Ascension. Growing up Baptist, I never heard of it as a special day; it was something for Catholics who had to go to mass on Thursday. But beyond that, it's a little weird to celebrate someone saying good-bye. For me, that was the rather poignant meaning of the Ascension: Jesus saying good-bye to his followers, going back to where he came from and leaving them alone. It was like the time I stood on the docks at Yokohama, barely 8 years old, watching my two big brothers go back to America to school. I held the streamer they threw down from the President Wilson as long as I could, but the ship sailed off and they were gone. I imagined the disciples staring into the sky looking at the soles of Jesus' feet getting smaller and smaller, then having this sinking feeling in their hearts: Now what?

But for the early Christians, Jesus' going up to God was not something sad. It was the greatest thing in the world. It was what they proclaimed as good news from the very beginning. Peter on the day of Pentecost announced that "this same Jesus whom you crucified God has made both Lord and Messiah." The Ascension for the first preachers was continuous with the Resurrection; God raised Jesus from the dead and raised him to the highest place.

I love to celebrate the Ascension now. It's right up there with Christmas and Easter as a great day for worship. If Jesus had only been born as a man, we would have nothing to celebrate but a God who understood our weakness. If Jesus had only died on a cross, we would have nothing to celebrate but that a good man was faithful unto death. If Jesus had only been raised from the dead and lived out his life on earth, we would have nothing to celebrate but God's vindication of one man's innocence. But that is not the end of the story. Jesus died and rose and was raised to the highest place, to the throne of God. Because Jesus who became one of us and died for us now reigns over the whole universe, we have something to celebrate indeed! Our Friend, our Savior, our Teacher, our Lord is the one in charge! This is the gospel: not only that Jesus came and died for us, but that the very person who died for us runs the world, reigning with God *as* God.

When Queen Elizabeth II was crowned in the year of my birth, she was given a royal orb, a circular gold object with a cross of jewels. These are the words with which it was delivered to her: "Receive the orb set under the cross, and remember that the whole world is subject to the power and empire of Christ our Redeemer." Whether she believed it or not, whether any of the rulers of this world believe it or not, it is true.

I like the story of the three year-old boy who was acting up one day. His Christian mother grabbed his shoulders and looked him straight in the eye and asked, "Who's in charge now?" The little boy, who had been in church since he was born, replied, "Jesus."

Soon after the end of World War II, the pastor-theologian Karl Barth gave a series of lectures on the Apostle's Creed in a German city that had been reduced to rubble. People gathered in the morning before the bulldozers started digging up the city so they could hear the lectures. In that setting, Barth spoke of the Ascension. He noted that in the creed, everything was in the past tense until you got to this sentence: "He ascended into heaven [past] and sits [present] on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." This is what we say about the present, right now,

he said, whether we have been bombed out or endured a tornado or the economy has collapsed: Jesus Christ is in charge. Barth said, “This is the first and last thing we can and should say about our lives and about the world.”

There are many New Testament texts that speak about the Ascension, but I want to focus your thoughts this morning on the one verse printed in the order of worship, Ephesians 4:10: “The one who came down is the same one who went up, above and beyond the heavens, to fill the whole universe with his presence” [Good News Bible]. My tendency is to emphasize the journey downward, how Jesus identified with us, humbled himself, and suffered for us. That is the journey of God’s love. But there is an upward arrow, too, and that is the journey of God’s justice—the story of how God is making everything right again, restoring all things to himself, which begins with Jesus the rejected one being elevated to the place of glory and authority. And this little note in Ephesians 4—in a passage that is mainly about spiritual gifts—reveals how Paul and the early Christians thought about the glad event of the Ascension. Far from being the *removal* of God’s presence from the world, the Ascension means that Christ filled the whole universe with his presence. Everything from the lowest point on earth to the highest point in heaven—and of course height is a metaphor, but that’s the only way we can think—everything is now filled with Christ.

John Calvin wrote back in the 1530’s, “Christ left us in such a way that this presence might be more useful to us—a presence that had been confined in a humble abode of flesh as long as he sojourned on earth....As his body was raised up above all the heavens, so his power and energy were diffused and spread beyond all the bounds of heaven and earth.” You see, Calvin and other theologians with imagination did not understand the Ascension as a move from Point A to Point B, as if he had been relocated from Block Island to headquarters in Providence. It was a change in his status and in his state of being. He went from being here to being everywhere. This is not a myth that took a long time to develop. It was the conviction of the earliest believers. Paul could say as an aside, without fear of contradiction, that Christ in going up had filled all things with himself.

We moderns are so literal-minded and unimaginative we may have trouble with an idea like that. We want to make fun of the idea that Jesus could go up to God, when going up from a rotating sphere like the earth means that at every moment “going up” is in a different direction. We like to write off the Bible as stuck with a three-story universe. But the early Christians were not so literal-minded. They had imagination. They could imagine the person they had known—Jesus—as the one who made the world before time began, who was now the force holding everything together. They thought thoughts that would blow our minds. Listen to Augustine riffing on this question, asking God: “I know that nothing can exist without you; does that mean that whatever exists contains you?...Do the heavens and the earth contain you, since you fill them? Or do you cram them to overflowing? And if you do overflow the universe, into what do you overflow? And then, when you will all things, do you fill it with your whole being?” [Confessions, 1, 3]

The ancients knew that God cannot be understood by simple diagrams drawn by engineers; God is apprehended through imagination stimulated by poetry and music and philosophy and the beauty of creation itself. The Bible itself makes us stretch our categories. In Jeremiah (23:24) God asks, “Do I not fill heaven and earth?” In Isaiah’s vision of God high and lifted up he hears creatures of flame singing, “The whole earth is full of your glory!” The whole earth! In the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God.” Christ has filled the universe with himself.

Maybe children have less trouble understanding these things. When Nathan was 11 or so, we had a concert at church by Kyle Mathews, a wonderful songwriter who talked about God's presence in creation. A couple of night later, I was putting Nathan to bed and he said a beautiful prayer: "Thank you for the universe, because without it your love would have nowhere to go." That is a very old idea: that the reason God created the universe was so that there would be a place for his love to overflow. He created the world, and us, so that he could fill everything with himself.

"Science fiction" as it is usually called is really fiction of the imagination allowed to run free, and as such it is sometimes theological. One sci-fi fan (John Stonecypher) wrote a meditation on the Ascension based on Star Trek, called "Jesus @ Warp 10."

The Starship Enterprise measures speed in exponential multiples of c , the speed of light. Warp 9.99 is nearly 8,000 times light speed. A common misconception is that, by going just a little faster, the Enterprise would get to Warp 10. Not so. A starship can forever get closer to Warp 10 without ever achieving it. An object going Warp 10 would be filling every point in the universe simultaneously, which as we all know, doesn't happen.

What does Jesus say as he 'flies away'? He doesn't say "My Father lives out in space, and I'm going there now, which means I won't be with you." Nope. He says "I am with you always." A strange thing to hear from someone who is in the process of leaving you. Imagine the incarnate Jesus, risen from the dead, jetting into space. Speeding up as he goes. See ya later, Moon... There goes Mars... Jupiter and Saturn are a blur... Here's Alpha Centauri... On to Andromeda galaxy... [you get the idea]. If the Borg are trying to follow him, he's totally left them in the dust by now. We all know Warp 10 is impossible. But then again, the impossible has never stopped Jesus before. What happens if Speedy Jesus hits Warp 10? He is still a human being with a physical body, but by definition he is now filling every point in the created universe simultaneously.

<http://theadoptedlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/jesus-warp-10-by-john-stonecypher1.pdf>

I'm not saying that is the way to understand what Paul means when he says that Christ fills the universe with himself. I'm just saying to use your imagination.

If Christ fills the universe, is he present with us here? Look at this table set here. Churches and nations have divided over the question of whether Christ is present in this bread. Martin Luther and his followers wanted to hold on to the idea of Christ's "real presence" in the Lord's Supper without accepting either the idea of transubstantiation or the notion that this is a "mere memorial." They argued on the basis of the Ascension—the rising of the human body of Jesus to the right hand of God, filling the universe with himself—speaking of "the ubiquity of the glorified body of Christ." They said that Christ's glorified body is everywhere present in body as well as in spirit. Is Christ present in the bread? Yes. Under, over, and within the bread? Yes. Is Christ present in me? Yes. Is Christ present in the universe? Yes. The one who loves us, the one who reigns over everything, is not far away. He is present. Here. Thanks be to God.