

Don't Look Up

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Niki de Saint Phalle, Sky Dance

Preaching on:

Acts 1:1–11

Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong would often tell a story about the Ascension and the world-famous astrophysicist Carl Sagan. According to Spong, while he was at a conference once, Sagan approached him and asked him, “Do you know what the Ascension would have looked like to an astrophysicist?” Spong replied, “You know, I’ve never really considered it. What would the Ascension have looked like to an astrophysicist?” And Sagan tells him, “If 2000 years ago, Jesus had left the earth traveling at the speed of light (186,000 miles per second), he still wouldn’t even have escaped

our galaxy yet—and there are billions and billions of galaxies!”

For Bishop Spong, famously a very liberal reformer, this story was an illustration of the problem of taking our scriptures too literally. Did Jesus really literally physically fly off to heaven? If so, then according to Carl Sagan and Jack Spong, he’s still got a really long way to go. If Jesus didn’t go to outer space, where did he go? Where actually is heaven, anyway?

Now we don’t have to go as far as the Enlightenment and science to find reason not to take the story of the Ascension too literally. Because even the Biblical text itself seems to advise us to hold onto this story with open hands and to try to let it breathe a little bit. There are actually two versions of this story. The first version is the final story in the Gospel of Luke. And the second version (which we read this morning) is the first story in the Book of Acts. And while both versions see Jesus floating off to heaven, other than that they’re very different tales. You wouldn’t know—believe it or not!—that they were written by the very same person (let’s just follow tradition and call him Luke).

In a court of law, if you want to establish credibility and convince people of the truth of your story, you need to be consistent, right? If the details of your story change, that’s an indication that there’s something wrong with your memory or your honesty. But that doesn’t concern Luke. The last page of Volume One and the first page of Volume Two contain two different versions of the same story.

The first version is a conclusion of Jesus’ earthly ministry, the removal of the human God, Jesus, from center stage; the second version is the beginning of our earthly ministry, the introduction of the Spirit God, the Holy Spirit, to the stage. Luke, without trying to hide what he was doing, without any worry that people would think it was funny, fully confident that he was playing by the rules of the game, changes the story to suit his purposes in each book.

Luke is telling us: Jesus’ Ascension is not about a trip to outer space. Jesus’ Ascension is an encounter in our inner space. Like most miracles, the objective outer experience is less important than the subjective, inner effect it has upon those who are witnesses to it. So, naturally, the details of the story and the interpretation of the story change as our inner perspective changes.

This is a double rejection of materialism. It rejects the materialist view that religion can’t be true *because* the physical details are impossible. And it rejects the fundamentalist view that the spiritual truth of religion can only be true *if* the physical details are facts. Both perspectives were utterly alien to Luke when he was writing. Something amazing happened! Let’s not get stuck on the pesky little details. Let’s talk about what this means!

As if on cue, in the Acts version of the Ascension we read this morning, two new characters show up. Luke calls them men in white robes; you might call them angels. And they have a somewhat weird message. While Jesus is being carried away by a cloud, they ask the disciples, “Why are you just standing there looking up into heaven? Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come

in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Even the angels are speaking strangely. It almost seems like they’re chastising the disciples a little bit for standing around and gawking. But it’s strange to do that while Jesus is flying away on a cloud. And it’s all the more strange to chastise them for looking up while admitting that Jesus will return the same way he left.

I can only conclude that Jesus’ exit from this earth was a mysterious one and that his return to the earth will not be on a cloud from some physical heaven somewhere up above us but will be made manifest instead in this world through a spiritual process that cannot be accomplished merely by looking to heaven for answers or waiting for the inevitable apocalypse to come. I agree with Carl Sagan: Jesus’ Ascension was not a trip to outer space. It couldn’t have been a trip to outer space because heaven is not up in the sky.

Now in the original Greek of Luke and Acts, there weren’t two different words for sky and for heaven. It was just the same word. The story of the Ascension acknowledges that linguistic limitation—that the world had not yet separated the idea of heaven from the idea of sky. In the cosmology of everybody everywhere at that time, heaven was UP. But the two angels enter this second version of the Ascension story to begin to challenge that connection. Why are you looking UP to heaven when heaven is not really UP? Jesus is not a trip to outer space, he’s on a journey to inner space, to source of everything, because as he literally told you, the Kingdom of Heaven is within you.

And so if Jesus is to return to us, he won’t return from the sky you experienced him departing to, he will return from the Kingdom of Heaven that you make manifest within you and that you together express into the world around you. That is how Jesus will return—he will return from within you. As Jesus says in the noncanonical Gospel of Thomas, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

Astrophysicists look up in the sky and they seek out the origins of the universe. And they’ve traced it back so far to “the Big Bang”: a singularity that exploded and stretched into the entire expanding cosmos. And that’s great. I love that stuff. I have no problem with looking up at that story. When astronomers say, “We’ve looked 46.6 billion light years away and still no heaven!” I can only agree with them, and it doesn’t cause me any concern whatsoever. Because I know there’s another direction we can go. We can look up for the origins of the cosmos, but to discover the source from which the cosmos arises and returns, to find the Alpha and the Omega of all life and all creation, to truly encounter and experience God in this body, we must travel within.

But Christianity is not a religion of individual inner experience alone. It’s a religion of community, togetherness, fellowship, love, mission, forgiveness, transforming the world for the better. So, this is the story so far: God the creator is up in Heaven. But God decides to come down to earth and become the human Jesus. Jesus departs the earth for the heaven no longer above us but within us. And from that inner experience, we Christians express the Kingdom of Heaven into the world through the power

of God, now within and among us as the Holy Spirit. And for those of you who want to hear more, I'll pick up from here on Trinity Sunday in two weeks.

For now, Beloved, just know that it's true. Jesus is not moving at the speed of light through space. He's moving at the speed of our faith and at the speed of our expression through all of us. Don't look up. Look within, look to another, and then act together. And as miraculously as he departed, Jesus will come again.