Staying Alive

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

We shared on Easter Sunday a video in worship as part of our children’s message. A little girl named Eliana explained Easter using her own words and friendly drawings. We had so many requests for the video that we e-blasted it to our entire mailing list. It was opened 1400 times within a span of several days.

I find myself listening with a different quadrant of my brain when children talk about God and Jesus. Maybe that’s why so many of us appreciated Eliana’s unique vantage point.

I loved the way Eliana described Jesus’ ascension into heaven. She likened it to a rocket blast off, as though Jesus had a jet pack strapped to his back, such as you might find in a James Bond movie. Then, in a moment of comic relief, Jesus’ disciples pull out their cell phones to spread the good news.

The 4th century theologian St. Augustine regarded Ascension Day as an essential Christian holiday. He regarded it as more important than even Christmas or Easter. If Ascension Day is this crucial, why have so few of us even heard of it? It doesn’t help matters that Ascension Day is celebrated 40 days after Easter, meaning that it always falls on a Thursday. Ascension Day functions as little more than a theological footnote alongside the more celebrated story of Jesus’ resurrection.

I like what Eugene Peterson and Marva Dawn write of Ascension Day. “Ascension Day is the perfect church holiday because the world can’t steal it. Our culture has ruined Christmas and Easter….The world has stolen Christmas and Easter for its consumerist purposes.” I couldn’t agree more. Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny always seem to trump Jesus’ birth and resurrection. Our culture hasn’t yet found a way to commercialize Ascension Day.

Ascension Day commemorates Jesus’ ascent into heaven. It figures prominently in the words of the Apostles’ Creed: “He ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

Jesus’ ascension has critical importance to Luke’s gospel. Luke concludes his gospel this way: “He left them and was taken up into heaven” (Luke 24:51). The ascension serves...
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as Jesus’ crowning achievement in Luke’s gospel.

Luke also authored the book of Acts. He intended Acts to serve as the second volume to the gospel that bears his name. Luke begins Acts with the account of Jesus’ ascension. Jesus issues parting words to his disciples, and then Luke records, “Jesus was taken up before their very eyes” (Acts 1:9). His ascension functions as the culminating event in Luke’s gospel as well as the inaugural event in Acts. This can hardly be coincidental. Jesus’ ascension operates much like a hinge, connecting Jesus’ life, death and resurrection to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the subsequent birth of the church.

Jesus’ ascension is critically important for four reasons. First, Jesus’ ascension marks the definitive end to his earthly ministry and a decisive beginning to his reign in heaven. When Jesus finishes his ministry on earth, he doesn’t retire to paradise to play golf and lounge at poolside. Jesus Christ ascends to God to intercede for us.

The New Testament writers attest to his ongoing ministry as our advocate and intercessor. Paul writes in Romans that “Jesus is at God’s right hand interceding for us” (8:34). This same thought is expressed in Hebrews, where Jesus is portrayed as a high priest who “always lives to intercede for us” (7:25).

God has assigned to Jesus the role as our defense attorney. I don’t want to create the impression that this benevolent Jesus is seeking to cajole an otherwise curmudgeon God to cut us some slack. The very idea to assign Jesus the role as our defender and advocate originates in the heart of God. Jesus going up to heaven doesn’t mean he goes away. He continues to intercede for us.

Second, Jesus’ ascension validates his divinity. His ascension confirms Jesus is Savior and Lord.

I had a vivid imagination as a child. When I heard people recite the Apostles’ Creed and profess belief that Jesus sits on God’s right hand, somehow I imagined Jesus as actually sitting on God’s right hand. As a budding southpaw, this was another slap in the face. Even God was right-handed.

Ascending to God’s right hand is a figurative way of expressing that Jesus is raised to the highest place. He goes where no one has ever gone before. That’s why we give Jesus preeminence. That’s why we call him Lord.

Third, Jesus’ ascension in a body underscores the significance of this material world. It’s not insignificant that Jesus is raised in a body. This Jesus who descended to earth in bodily form now ascends to heaven in physical form. This very one who came down to earth is the same one who goes
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The sweet hereafter isn’t only spiritual.

up to heaven. He doesn’t go up to go away.

Some Christians interpret the book of Revelation as suggesting that the world as we know it will one day be incinerated and destroyed. Yet, the final chapters of Revelation declare that Jesus will someday return to establish God’s kingdom on earth. The angels in the book of Acts who accompany Jesus’ ascension into heaven announce to these watching disciples, “Why do you stand here looking at the sky? This same Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

The sweet hereafter isn’t only spiritual. God’s coming kingdom will have a physical dimension. Jesus’ ascension in a body testifies that the whole material world matters to God. What we do with our bodies matters to God. What we do to care for the environment matters to God. Anything we seek to do on earth to promote human flourishing matters to God.

Fourth, Jesus’ ascension serves as the necessary prelude to the coming Holy Spirit. Many Christians are mystified about this third member of the Trinity. It doesn’t help matters that the King James phrase, Holy Ghost, further complicates the issue. Let me say it as simply as I know how. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God the Father and Jesus the Son which resides in every believer.

Had Jesus remained on earth, he would have been geographically limited. While on earth, Jesus accepts the limitations that come with a human body. He knows he can only be one place at a time. But when he ascends to God’s right hand, Jesus can now, through the Spirit, be everywhere at once. That’s how he can both simultaneously live in me and live in you. Jesus through the Holy Spirit can now be wonderfully everywhere at once.

Jesus, near the end of his ministry, recognizes that it’s time to push his disciples out of the nest. That’s why he announces, “It is to your advantage that I go away. Unless I go away, this Counselor will not come to you. But if I go I will send him to you” (John 7:16).

I like the way John Calvin expresses it. “Christ left us in such a way that his presence might be more useful to us….As his body was raised up above the heavens, so his power and energy were diffused and spread beyond all bounds of heaven and earth.” Christ’s presence is diffused much the way light reflects through a prism. A shaft of light enters a prism and refracts light in all directions.

Chris and I visited our son Andrew and his family last month. They live north of Boston where Andrew intro-
produces faith to young businessmen while preparing for future ministry in seminary. Andrew and Becky have two sons. The older among them, Luke is 3½ (don’t forget the half; that’s really important when you’re a 3-year-old).

Luke likes to play hide-and-go-seek with me. So, I’ll count to ten and go looking for Luke. It’s not hard. He likes to hide in obvious places. Sometimes he’ll jump out at me when I come near. He has in his mind that the object of the game is to be found. This is a really interesting way to play hide-and-go-seek!

If God is playing hide-and-go-seek games with us, God is surely playing Luke’s way. God wants to be found. Sometimes, when I near the end of a good novel, I discover that the author has been leaving clues for me as a reader. The author wants me to pick up on the clues. God wants to be found.

Perhaps you are new to faith in Christ. Or, you’ve been living the Christian life for some time now but you feel as though God seems absent in your life. “If you seek me with all your heart, you will surely find me,” God says (Deuteronomy 4:29; Jeremiah 29:13). God is not playing games with us. God wants to be found.

The Holy Spirit ushers us into God’s presence. This Spirit also supplies God’s power for living. Maybe you’re doing all the right things and it still isn’t enough. Despite your best efforts, you still haven’t made the grade or climbed the corporate ladder or been reunited with an estranged friend or family member. And so you find yourself right now at the end of your strength.

I’m holding an everyday power strip; the kind you might use to connect a computer or electrical appliance. What would happen if I were to plug the attached cord into this power strip? Nothing! This cord needs to plug into an electrical outlet to receive power. Some of us are just plugged into ourselves. No wonder we’re living without God’s power. We’re not connected to the source.

Edward Bennett Williams, once a powerful DC lawyer and president of the Washington Redskins, was visited by a friend shortly before his death. His friend referenced all the power and influence Williams exerted in Washington. “Power,” Williams said, “I’m about to meet real power.”

You don’t have to wait until you die to meet this power. This power is available to you. I’m inviting you today to plug into Christ’s power.