

SERMON- Ascension (B- Observed)

Charles R. Cowherd

Acts 1:1-11

Luke 24:44-53

Good Shepherd

May 9, 2021

~~Psalm 47~~

OPENING:

It was 1984, it was the Feast of the Ascension here at the Church of the Good Shepherd, and an associate rector delivered a sermon that made an impression on at least one parishioner.

This parishioner wrote a letter to the Rector complaining about the preacher's reference to the Ascension as a "story." The parishioner pointed out that if such a major event in Christ's life were merely a "story" then what about the Resurrection and other parts of the Biblical narrative?

The parishioner's letter was worded very kindly, there was no evidence of personal animosity and the writer was open to other points of view.

But the parishioner did suggest that a sort of litmus test be enacted whereby all existing clergy and new hires agree to key points of doctrine, like the Ascension, in their preaching.

Another story: one time the famous Bishop Jack Spong was confronted at a conference by the (more famous) scientist Carl Sagan. Sagan came up to Spong and said: "Do you know what the Ascension would have looked like to an astrophysicist?"

Spong replied "You know, I never thought of that."

Sagan, shaking the Bishop's shoulders with two hands, said: "If Jesus had left the earth on that Ascension Day 2000 years ago, travelling the speed of light (186,000 miles per second), he would not have even left our galaxy by now!"

And then Sagan gave the obligatory:

"And there are billions and Billions and BILLIONS of galaxies in our cosmos!"¹

ASCENSION

What do we do with Ascension? You just heard criticism from both ends—from the liberal and the conservative ends of the spectrum, if you want to call them that.

On the one hand, this thing could not have possibly happened, scientifically speaking. On the other hand, there it sits in the Bible—in Luke and in Acts and in the Nicene Creed—which the parishioner helpfully pointed out in his letter was awkwardly affirmed right after that fateful sermon 40 years ago, as it will be today.

¹ [Biblical Literalism: Jesus Hasn't Left the Galaxy - YouTube](#)

I was not there when that sermon was preached in 1984; sermons are so contextual; so God knows what was going on in this community here at that moment, or in that listener's heart.

I was also not there, of course, when Jesus ascended; though apparently at Bethany outside Jerusalem, there is an imprint of Jesus' footprint so you can go and see the Ascension launchpad if you would like.

Science matters now more than ever, facts matter, evidence matters, truth matters. But stories matter too, how we tell them, which ones we tell. I don't believe there is such a thing as "just a story" so what I would like to preach a full-throated, vigorous defense of the term "story"— and of the Ascension story and all stories.

STORIES

I'll begin with a quote from no higher authority than Professor Dumbledore from the *Harry Potter* series. It comes near the very end of that (very long) story, as Harry is trying to wrap his brain around all the fantastical events that have occurred to him over those 7 books. He has "ascended" (so to speak) to some separate astral plane and Harry asks: "Is this real? Does this mean that this is all in my head?" And Dumbledore replies so sagely: "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"²

Besides being a huge Harry Potter fan, my wife is a Mental Health Therapist for the severely mentally ill and she talks about how she and her colleagues use this quote with their clients.

This quote, she says, has the ability to point out that whatever delusion, whatever the neuroses, whatever the hang-up going on inside ourselves, that it is ever so real. Even if it's "only happening in your head," it demands attention and care and love and strength and rejection, sometimes, and medication, sometimes, because it's real.

Most of us, thank God, don't have to struggle with that sort of inner battle, when it comes to our stories, at least to that degree.

But think of the stories that you tell in your family, the silly ones, the important ones, think of the ones that are elemental to who you are. The stories about births and deaths. The ones about grandparents and long-lost Uncles. The ones about the goodbyes and hellos. The ones about love and hate. Those are the ones that create who we are. And they are so very real.

² *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, pg. 723.

With those stories, it's not about getting out a microscope and trying to figure out "what really happened." Likewise, with the Ascension, a telescope would not help you. Instead, it's thinking about how these stories change our realities, our perspectives, and our ability for understanding.³

JUSTIN BIEBER

Here is another story.

This one, like the Ascension it is hard to believe at first glance.

This story is from a recent article in *GQ* magazine about Justin Bieber, the pop singer and Canadian bad boy superstar. The 'Biebs', apparently, has found Jesus. I was skeptical but, apparently in the last few years, he has come to a sincere religious conversion.

Here is Justin Bieber, in the *GQ* article, sounding a lot of like St. Paul:

"I came to a place... where I just was like, 'God, if you're real, I need you to help me, because I can't do this on my own. Like, I'm struggling so hard. Every decision I make is out of my own selfish ego.... 'What is it that you want from me?... What's the point? What is the point of everything? What is the point of me being on this planet?'"

And apparently what happened was that as Bieber asked for help, "someone or something answered. (Bieber) suddenly had a certainty: "If God forgives me and He loves me and He set these things in motion, if He put these desires in my heart, then I'm going to trust Him....'"⁴

So Bieber joined a church, sobered up, got married, and is a changed man.

It's a remarkable story.

But, if you are like me, reading this article in *GQ*, looking at the glossy photographs of Bieber in a \$1,000 pair of pants, and an \$8,000 *Cartier* watch, you say:

"Let's just wait for him to be back in the headlines for a DUI or shop-lifting or a divorce or whatever."

That makes me a bit of a Pharisee but I share the company of the article's author who was also questioning if it was all really "true" and "real."

Although the story was entitled "The Redemption of Justin Bieber," the author, in

³ Linda Lee Clader "Homiletical Perspective" in Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett, eds. *Feasting on the Gospel* (Year A, Volume 2) Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 515

⁴ Zach Baron, "The Redemption of Justin Bieber" *GQ* (April 13, 2021) [The Redemption of Justin Bieber | GQ](#)

fact, would not let him be redeemed. He kept offering these asides that seemed to say: “You don’t have to believe this story.... You don’t have to feel sympathy or compassion or anything.... this is too good to be true. Don’t afford him grace because he might make me and you look stupid one day.”

A story “that’s too good to be true.”

The Ascension is “too good to be true”

A savior who died for us is “too good to be true.”

The blind seeing, the hungry fed. These stories are unbelievable, and ridiculous.

So are stories about wizards and pop singers turned Jesus freaks.

Instead it’s easier to paper over them and dismiss them and retreat into some of other reality (that we have created) that is more comfortable.

CONCLUSION

Notice what our Creed says about this story. It does not say “I believe in the Ascension” ... we say instead: “I believe that Jesus ascended into heaven.”

That’s how the early church told the story. It happened in history, but we demand a rational explanation. We try to fit it into OUR worldview, and it starts to slip away as a “hollow abstraction.” The Medieval Church told it in story and structure but we try to force that story to fit into our rationality, with the result, and as one commentator puts it: “The result is an eerie silence. The music has stopped, and the stories are being forgotten.” We have “defoliated and depopulated our stories” and we are poorer for it.⁵

I will let Justine Bieber the poor author of the article have the last word. He writes that two things saved his subject, after he hit rock bottom and had nowhere else to go.

He writes that those two things were “his marriage and his faith.”

That’s how the author tells that story and I am a big fan of those two things, but let’s go for precision of language in our story-telling. It was not his marriage that saved him, his faith did not save him.

Rather, his wife did, Jesus did.

His wife and Jesus saved him. Instead of some concepts that we hide behind.

What a powerful story, what unbelievable ones that we witness and maintain the witness, stories that are worthy to tell your children, and your grandchildren, and to all those who need to hear them.

AMEN

⁵ Culpepper, Alan R. 2007. *Mark*. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 65-66.