

**7th Sunday of Easter
June 5, 2011
10 AM and 5:30 PM Liturgies**

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I would like you to conjure an image with me today. It comes from an old movie starring Christopher Reeve, Margot Kidder, and Gene Hackman as Lex Luthor. The movie is, of course: Superman! It was hard for me to read that this was first released in 1978; it seems like just yesterday to me. I realize some of you may not have been born by then, but I'm trusting that you may have had some reason to see it anyway.

The image I want us to recreate comes in the scene where Superman, alias Clark Kent, first flies just for Lois off her balcony (and later takes her for her first ride). As I recall, he is dressed up in his characteristic blue tights and red cape and boots. He looks dashing (at least Lois thinks so). And he has been suiting her and kind of flirting on her balcony. And then he ever so quietly raises his right arm (like such) and gently floats into the sky above Metropolis. He just hovers for a bit. It's a marvelous moment. Can you see it? Do you remember it?

How much does it remind you of what must have happened to Jesus at his ascension? Really! How do you *image* that mystery? Or do you at all? It is very easy to just dismiss the ascension. Forget it. But we can't really.

So what happened, do you think? What do you see in your mind when you think of it?

Some theologians have argued that, as difficult as it is for us to image what happened at the resurrection of Jesus, it is even more difficult to grasp the meaning of the Ascension—let alone image it. Fr. Ron Rolheiser suggests that the ascension is probably the most “under-understood” mystery we have.

Yet these are the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost when we celebrate liturgically this part of the mystery. The least we can do is try to clarify what we think we might be celebrating. But it is not easy.

St. Luke is the Evangelist who temporally separates the three great moments of Jesus’ resurrection into Easter Sunday, Ascension (forty days later), and finally Pentecost (ten days after that). Luke does this mostly in the Acts of the Apostles. The other writers, most notably John, conflate the entire experience into a single mystery (death, rising, ascension, and sending of the Spirit). But either way, an ascension needs to be counted as critically important. Why? Our opening prayer gives a great hint. “Father, help us to keep in mind that Christ our savior lives with you in glory *AND* promised to remain with us until the end of time.” How can he do both? At the same time?

Jesus leaves his friends and disciples a second time: the first, the result of a bloody execution. But then he is back—physically and spiritually back with them on a Sunday morning in the garden. The second good-bye occurs, Luke tells us, weeks later on a mount near Jerusalem. Jesus says good-bye again and leaves a second time—just as physically and spiritually. But where exactly did he go? To heaven, the scriptures tell us. But where, then, is that?

At least since the time of the Enlightenment, the dawning of the scientific age, few people have been able to take a physical ascension with much seriousness. Some cynics have outright mocked it; others have to “spiritualize” it. (As in: well Jesus was once with God, came to earth for a while with a body, and has now “gone back to God” in spirit. But he does promise us a “Holy” part of that Spirit to remain with us.)

So, many people believe that only Jesus’ Spirit remains with us. According to Bishop N.T. Wright, a rather bright church historian and scripture scholar, that’s what most Christians still believe in the 21st century (*Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church.*) But that idea has actually already been condemned as heresy.

The problem is that that can’t be right if the experience of the

resurrection is a physical event. And it was. Jesus “spirit” wasn’t raised at Easter; his whole self was resurrected, *body and spirit*. He ate and drank with them; he let them feel his body; and when he leaves again on Ascension Thursday, he has still got that same physical body. Where does it go?

I suggested to some of you in an Easter homily a few weeks ago that we are in desperate need of a few new images for the 21st century mind. And I further suggested that we do have some new images available for us both in the realm of art and science. Those of us who grew up on Star Trek have no difficulty imaging parallel universes that intersect and interpenetrate each other. We can even see ourselves transporting between them.

Decades earlier, C. S. Lewis gave us a glimpse into a magic kingdom called Narnia. It, too, opened through a hidden armoire door between universes. And modern quantum physics provides even more puzzling images as it attempts to describe the multi-dimensional universe we actually live in without seeing most of the dimensions. It’s called string theory.

This is exactly how Bishop Wright suggests we post-modern Christians begin to fathom the “mystery of saying good-bye” that is the Feast of the Ascension. Heaven and earth may not even be spatially distinct. Heaven

and earth may be ruled by a single, fully human, fully physical Lord and Savior whose will is now done “on earth as it is in heaven.” Because he is still in both at the same time!

Jesus is now “seated,” as it were, squarely back in the dimension from which he came, the fullness of reality we call God. But he is also still here with us—and perhaps in more ways than purely “spiritually.” How this all happens is still certainly a great mystery for us, but it seems to me these newer images are more plausible and exciting images to ponder and test. For me, it beats watching Jesus’ feet dangling below the clouds, like Superman.

Images need to change with the times. And they do. There is an early 12th century depiction by an unknown German artist of Christ’s ascension. In it, Jesus’ feet rest on a cloud as he raises one hand to heaven and with the other seems to wave good-bye to his friends below (very much like our Superman). It seems quite consistent with a 12th century cosmology. At the Metropolitan Museum in New York, there is a fresco by Hans von Kulmbach (16th century) that depicts just two feet—hanging as it were, from a cloud. That’s all you see: feet. It is actually kind of comical. But that too seems consistent for the time—that time.

But in the 20th century (1925 to be exact), the admittedly more than slightly bizarre painter Salvador Dali begins to imagine a more modern scene. This time we see only the large soles of Jesus' feet dominating the lower half of the frame. The painting is done from below the ascending Jesus. His head is fast approaching what looks like a gigantic yellow egg-yolk with electrical storms sparkling on both sides. It looks somewhat like those fantastic photos of exploding nebulae taken by the Hubble space telescope a few years ago. Here this Jesus is breaking through to an entirely new level of reality, a new experience of consciousness. He has become a brand new creation—one not even imagined by Hubble himself, the scientist, but only by Dali, the artist.

The ascension is essential for God to show us this new road-map into what is really real in our universe. And that reality, God promises, will be more strangely real than “whatever eye has seen or ear has heard” throughout the ages. Superman pales in comparison.

So perhaps with some new imaginative possibilities, may the real God of the resurrection and ascension continue to Easter in us with surprise and delight. Peace!