

Going Home for the First Time

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Luke 24:36-53

It was the third day. That morning the tomb had been empty. That afternoon a couple from Emmaus had shared their grief with a stranger. Later the stranger was made known to them in the breaking of bread. Then he was gone. The couple returned to Jerusalem immediately and told the gathered disciples what had happened.

While they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace to you.” They were alarmed and terrified. They thought they were seeing a spirit. Then he said to them, “Why are you distressed? Why are doubts rising in your hearts? Look at my wrists and my feet. It’s me. Touch me and see. A spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” After he said this, he showed them his wrists and his feet.

They still couldn’t believe it from joy and amazement, when he said to them, “What do you have here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish. He took it and ate it in front of them.

Then he said to them, “When I was still with you, this is what I told you: Everything written about me in the law of Moses, and the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. He said to them, “It is written: The Messiah is to suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all the nations in his name. You are witnesses of these things, beginning from Jerusalem. See, I am sending upon you what my Father promised. You are to stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from above.”

He led them off as far as Bethany, and he blessed them with upraised hands. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. They worshiped him, then returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they were in the temple blessing God all the time.

Children’s Story

Raisa Samsonov was born in Delaware, Ohio. But Russia was her home.

Raisa’s mom and dad came from Russia. They told Raisa stories about Russia. They taught her to speak Russian. And they cooked their favorite Russian foods for her.

So, even though Raisa grew up on a farm near Leonardsburg and graduated from Buckeye Valley High School and went to Ohio State University — even though she had lived her whole life in Ohio, Russia was her home. Russia was Raisa’s home even though she had never been there.

Last summer Raisa Samsonov boarded a plane at Port Columbus, flew to New York, changed planes, then flew all the way to Russia.

When she stepped out onto the streets of the city, she knew at once that she was home. It looked like Russia. It smelled like Russia. It sounded like Russia. It tasted like Russia.

Raisa had never been to Russia before. But she was sure that she was home, home for the first time.

Sermon

My mother believed in reincarnation. It was just a phase, but she was convinced. She would walk into a building she’d never been in before but have very clear memories of that place coming back to her. Everything that should have been unfamiliar was very familiar to her. Her explanation? She had been there in a previous life.

Apparently my mom hadn't heard of *déjà vu*. But she had experienced it. Deja vu is a strange, sometimes eerie, phenomenon. Our brains play a trick on us. A memory reflex is triggered, perhaps by a short circuit, so that what's happening now seems to have happened before. Everything looks very familiar, even if we've never been there before. I wonder if that's how Jesus felt when he went to heaven for the first time and took his seat at the right hand of God.

I say “for the first time” because Jesus had never been in heaven before. Heaven — which isn't a place we can point to — heaven was home for the eternal, only-begotten Son of God the Father, who was “begotten of the Father before all worlds,” to use the language of the Nicene Creed. This eternal Son came to earth from heaven. And through his ascension, he returned to heaven from earth, going home again to the place he had almost always been.

But Jesus had never been in heaven before. Remember, there was no Jesus until the Incarnation. (How often we come back to the Incarnation these days!) When the eternal Son of God took on flesh at a particular time, at a particular place, and through a particular mother — then there was a person named Jesus. Jesus was conceived on earth. He was born on earth, lived on earth, and died on earth. He was raised from the earth and stood again upon the earth. Then, and only then, did he leave the earth. When the eternal Son of God ascended to heaven, the person named Jesus was going home for the first time.

And his going there is hugely significant. The Heidelberg Catechism ascribes three benefits to the ascension of Jesus. First, it says, Jesus “pleads our cause [before] his Father.” Third, it says, Jesus “sends his Spirit to us.” And second, it says, “we have our own flesh in heaven.” That's where I want to focus today, because that's where Luke 24 puts the focus.

Luke 24 stresses the flesh (and bones) of Jesus. Jesus says, “Look at my wrists. Look at my feet. Touch me and see.” Then he says, “What do you have here to eat?” And he eats a piece of broiled fish. What a strange thing to include in the story! Unless, of course, you want to hammer home that this Jesus is “flesh and bones,” which is exactly Luke's intention.

This intention is especially for the sake of bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Luke affirms that Jesus rose physically, that he rose bodily, that he rose in the flesh. The resurrected Jesus is no mere “spirit,” disconnected from the dust of the earth. Luke's intention also makes a strong affirmation about the Ascension. It's the same “flesh and bones” Jesus that rose from the dead who also ascends to heaven.

The latest issue of the Christian Century magazine features some letters to the editor written in response to a recent editorial or article (I forget which) that emphasized the centrality of Jesus's resurrection. Some of the letter writers want to set aside the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Apparently a bodily resurrection is not spiritual enough. I wonder what they would say about an insistence not just on a bodily resurrection, but also on the bodily ascension of Jesus, that Jesus in the flesh is in heaven with God.

And there is just that insistence in the gospel, because the bodily ascension is not trivial. The Heidelberg Catechism says, “We have our own flesh in heaven.” Through the Incarnation, heaven comes to earth. Through the Incarnation, God comes to humanity. Through the Ascension, earth comes to heaven. Through the Ascension, humanity comes to God (see Daniel 7 for more on that). The connection between God and humanity is intact. In the flesh and spirit of Jesus, heaven and earth intersect. That intersection continues to this day, because Jesus, “flesh and bones” Jesus, is seated at God's right hand. Now, for the first time and forever, a human being is in the place that was made for us from the beginning.

Jesus is our “flesh and bones.” At the same time he is the “image of God.” He reigns with God, as human beings were always meant to do. He completes the circle that was broken near the beginning. He puts things right. As C.S. Lewis writes in his Narnia chronicles, “Once a king or queen in Narnia, always

a king or queen in Narnia.” We were made to reign with God. We shall reign with God. And, in Jesus, we do reign with God.

That’s the theology of the Ascension, but what difference does any of this make here and now?

Not just that the eternal Son of God has returned to the Father’s side, but that Jesus, the “flesh and bones” human being, with bits of broiled fish stuck between his teeth — that Jesus went home for the first time, that a human being sits at the right hand of God — what difference does that make?

The Heidelberg Catechism says it affects our hope, that Jesus’s human presence with God guarantees that one day we will live with God and God will live with us. That’s our hope. And hope makes a difference here and now. With good hope we can endure bad times. With sure hope we can survive uncertainty. With bright hope we can keep moving in the darkness.

There’s more — it anticipates next Sunday’s theme, but that’s unavoidable. Jesus received his flesh from Mary through the Holy Spirit. Now he sends that same Spirit to us. Through Jesus we have our flesh in heaven. Through the Holy Spirit we have heaven in our flesh. Jesus completed the heaven and earth circle through his incarnation and ascension. The heaven and earth connection remains, and Jesus draws us into that circle through the Holy Spirit.

Listen to what the Heidelberg Catechism says about the Spirit, about heaven in our flesh. “By the Spirit’s power we make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but the things above where Christ is, sitting at God’s right hand.” That is, in this life we begin to live the life of the world to come. In other words, we become servants of the Kingdom of God.

Now, I don’t know about you, but I want something close to proof of that. I want more than an assertion. I want large-scale evidence of change in us. And I want large-scale evidence of our kingdom service to show up in the world around us. I want every knee to bend before Jesus, beginning with you and me. I want the earth to be filled with the knowledge of God, beginning with a hunger for the Word of God right here. I want “justice to roll down like waters” (Amos 5), and I want us to be the ones opening the floodgates. That’s what I want.

Here’s what I get. We attend meetings and make plans. We chip in to build a house. We tutor a disadvantaged fifth grade girl. We put in a good day’s work. We teach our children right from wrong. We read the Bible once in a while. We drop a check with more zeroes than usual into the collection plate. We pray for peace. That’s what we do. That’s what I see.

It doesn’t amount to much. It’s like a drop in bucket. It’s like a single wave in the ocean. It’s like . . . a mustard seed. But that puts us in company with Jesus. He did not heal every leper. He did not still every storm. He did not feed all the hungry. He did not overturn unjust Roman occupation. Jesus was (and still is) a human being. He did what he could do, as the Spirit enabled him. He did what he could do. We can do no more. I pray we will do no less.

But know this: When the Spirit of God sets to work, there is no end to what “flesh and bones” can do. When the Spirit of God sets to work, there is no limit to where “flesh and bones” can be — even upon the throne at the right hand of God.