

The Present Christ and the *NOW* Testament

(Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1: 15-23; Psalm 47; **Luke 24: 44-53**)

Two young boys were walking home after Sunday School. The Bible story that day had been about the Ascension of Jesus to heaven, and both boys had a puzzled look. The one lad said quietly to the other, "How do you think he *really* did it?" The other hastily replied, "I'll bet he had an invisible Bungee cord attached to him all the time he was on earth, and then when he needed to get back to heaven, he just snapped it and off he went!"

"No, that couldn't work," the first boy replied, "'cause when you're on a Bungee cord you're bouncing up and down all the time and you could never hold still."

"Hmm. Maybe," the other lad tried again, "maybe he had a *rocket pack* strapped to each leg, up under his robe so the others couldn't see, and then he just blasted off to heaven!"

"No," answered the other, "that would have fried the disciples who were standing around there under him."

Both lads were quiet for a minute, and then the one with the bigger imagination said, "Maybe it was like that magician guy on TV last week—maybe he just made the people *THINK* he was gone, but he wasn't really!" "Yeah," agreed the other, "I'll bet *that's* how he did it!"

Now, except for the part about a *magic* trick, those two young lads weren't too far off the mark, and Sunday School kids—I'll never get tired of saying this—often do make better theologians than adults. Somehow kids can more easily grasp how a thing or a person can be *both* present *and* absent, whereas for grownups those two concepts will be mutually exclusive. A *child's*-eye view on the Ascension story is not a bad approach to take, and for the next few minutes at least, we'll try to keep that perspective.

This is a Bible story that needs to be told more than just once a year. The story is so important that Luke uses it *twice*. It's the story he chooses to close his gospel, and then he uses it again to introduce his *second* book, the Acts of the Apostles. The story is absolutely packed with solid advice for the disciples at the very outset of their mission. But even more than that, this story *does* something that very *few* Bible stories are able to do. What the Ascension story does is this: it leaps across a gap of more than 2,000 years, and it speaks to us in the *present tense*. It speaks about a reality that is presently unfolding, about something happening right here and now, and without any difficult language or hidden meanings this story tells us *where* Jesus Christ is *today*, what he's *doing*, and what that means *for us*.

That's an amazing accomplishment for a Bible story, isn't it? Usually the task falls to us, when we read and interpret these stories, to build some sort of *bridge* over that 2,000-year gap and to find a way to make these stories from the past speak with some degree of relevance to our world and situation today. Usually it's *our* task to build the bridge, but once in a while we find a story that builds its own bridge, a story that does most of the interpretive groundwork for us, so that we can hear in plain and simple terms what the story has to say and what God has to say through it.

The story of the Ascension introduces us to “the Christ of the *present* tense”. Think about that. The word “Christ” that we use rather like a surname for Jesus, means “the Anointed One”, but that word has its own origin in a *verb*, an *action* word, that has to do with the act of anointing, marking one as absolutely unique and setting that one apart for a God-given task. This story is where we hear the action in the present tense. This story takes us beyond the Christ of the *past* tense, by which I mean it takes us beyond the earthly life of Jesus who lived and taught in Judea, who died in Jerusalem and then rose again and appeared to his disciples. The story speaks *briefly* about the Christ of the *future* tense, who will indeed return again, though here it’s stated clearly that it’s not for us to know when that day will be. This story puts the focus and all the emphasis on the Christ of the *present*. It captures the sheer drama of that moment as it begins and continues to unfold, and it lays before us the contemporary, timely significance of this Christ who meets us in our present. Though the Christ of past *may* be in *some* sense absent, Christ of the present is *present indeed, never* absent at all.

As an illustration of this dramatic shift into the *present* tense, let me tell you about another place where the same thing happens. Have you ever noticed, when we recite the Apostles’ Creed, the *dramatic* moment when the Creed jumps into the present? Recall how the Creed speaks first about Jesus in the *past* tense, describing him as “crucified, died and buried, descended into hell, and rose again from the dead.” But then the Creed suddenly states in the present tense, “He *is seated* at the right hand of the Father”. That shift into the present tense is where the Creed suddenly comes alive and becomes a statement of what we believe about Jesus Christ *today*. And that, I want to underline heavily, is no small matter. Of infinitely greater significance than what you believe about who Jesus *was* and what he *did*, is what you know and confess in faith about what he does *today*. Even more important than what you expect of Christ in the future, is the faith, hope and confidence you receive from knowing him *in the present*, right here in the midst of this life and this world.

Our faith in Christ is more than just a *memory*, more than just a conscious preservation or a ritualized memorial of the man Jesus and the lessons he taught or deeds he performed. By the same token, our faith is more than just *wishful thinking* about the distant future and about how things are going to turn out for us and for the world. What our faith is, in simplest possible terms, is a *relationship*—a living and *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ, today. Faith is *knowing* him, and it’s knowing him *as he is today*, everywhere present, enthroned in power over all creation and all the world. My point is that you cannot have a personal relationship with someone you have never met—neither with someone who was dead and gone long before you arrived, nor with someone who has not yet come. Personal relationships live, grow and unfold only in the living present. They need *verbs* in the *present* tense to express the truth and the feeling that lives within, and they need both partners in the relationship to be fully aware, fully attentive and alive in the present.

It's a shame so many people get confused about this, but this is a problem with deep roots in our human *nature*. Often it happens that we humans are more comfortable when living in the *past*, or perhaps when dreaming off into the *future*. Being fully *present* in the present *moment* is not easy for people. Mind you, children can do it easily. But for adults it often becomes a *lost art*, especially if the present moment contains some difficult realities or if it's hounded by guilt or plagued with worries. For too many people, the present is what they want most to *escape*, and our society has a million ways to *facilitate* that escape.

The story of the Ascension of Christ affirms for us, in simple terms and powerful drama, the Christ who is *still present*, the King who *now rules* in glory, the Lord who is *still seeking* the least and the lost. The Lord, who is powerfully *present* for his world, still seeks to enter into close personal relationship with us. So the problem, then, if there's any sense of the *absence* of Jesus, the problem lies on *our* side of the bargain. It lies among people who really aren't interested in or available for a personal relationship.

This may sound like a clumsy application of confused logic, but it is nonetheless a fact that a great many people are not fully *present* in the present. Many go through life more in the past than in the present. I've known a lot of people, and you probably know quite a few more, who really live in the past. They are, in fact, *trapped* in the past. Most commonly, the way that happens is simply by holding onto feelings of *guilt*. Have you ever noticed, when your conscience is acting up and you're feeling guilty about something you said or did, or think you should have said or should have done, how the past begins to exert a *stronger pull* on you than the present? Even when that past moment is not a comfortable place to be or a pleasant memory to hold onto, and even though there is absolutely nothing that can be done *back there* to *change* what happened, still your feelings and your imagination are trapped there, way back in the past, out of reach. *Guilt* does that, all by itself. When you hold onto guilt, it takes your awareness and your attention *out* of the *present*, where your feelings and behaviour *could* be changed, and it makes you waste your time *reliving* the past, over and over again. Another great way to confine yourself to living in the past is to go through life *blaming others* for how you turned out, blaming *past* events for your present difficulties. Blaming is a heavy chain that traps you in your past and it prevents you from getting to the present.

The other sure-fire way in which people absent themselves from the present is through the habit of worrying. These people—you know who you are—spend more time in the *future* than they do in the present. They spend more time thinking about things that have not *yet* happened, imagining possibilities no matter how remote or unlikely, quaking in fear of things that may have no *basis in reality*. They spend more time in a very uncertain unsettling future than they spend attending to the present, to the things that really *are* happening and to concerns that *do* have a basis in reality. As with guilt, so it is with worry. The real problem is not just that it's bad for your health and bound to shorten your life. The real problem is that it takes you *away from the present*. It makes you far less attentive and

less available *in* the present. It makes you far less appreciative of those present sources of courage and confidence that *could*, if you let them, put all your worries to rest, once and for all.

The really great news about the Ascension story, which is about Christ in the present tense, is that what Christ offers us, *right here* in the present, is first of all *forgiveness*, which is how you begin to cure and cut loose the guilt, and secondly he offers complete *confidence* that under his lordship the future is perfectly *safe* and in control, which is how you nip all the worries right in the bud. To put that another way, what Christ gives us in the present is *freedom*, both from the *nagging past* and from the *worrisome future*, freedom to be fully at home and at peace in the present, so that we can indeed *meet* Christ where *he* is, so we can have a personal relationship with him, which is how we find real faith in him.

That's one terrific bargain. Easily the best offer you'll ever find in life. Jesus Christ does 90 percent of the work, freely giving us what we need to know him, love him and share the power that is his, and all we have to do is accept what he offers right now. That's the good news of the gospel. In fact, that's where the New Testament becomes a *NOW* Testament, and that's what makes all the difference between real life—the kind of life that God intended and Jesus Christ delivered—and the *shabby excuse* for living that most of us carry along as we insist on reliving our past and worrying about our future.

This is the good news of the *NOW* Testament. The risen, ascended Christ we worship, is present among us just as he promised, whenever we gather in his name. Whenever we open up and give him our guilt and our fears in exchange for his grace and power, we will find the freedom, the courage and the honesty we need to *meet* him. And when we look for him in the *present* moment where he is, not just in a distant future with overtones of judgment or way back in the dusty past, but right here in *this* moment, then we can enjoy him and grow in his grace and be changed *by* him to be *like* him, from this moment onward.

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