

Up in the Air

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Acts 1:1-11

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I am guessing this weekend you will not be gathering for any Ascension Day barbecues or hanging your Ascension flag on your front porch or enjoying the extra Ascension holiday break. To be honest, the Ascension does not even have much of its own liturgical celebration but is simply acknowledged on the Thursday forty days after Easter and Christ's exaltation from his resurrection appearances on earth. And while I am guessing your commemoration of Ascension has not been robust, neither, historically it has had an important place in our practice as Christians. In a piece on the Ascension of Christ several years ago, John McClure reminds us that the 'Ascension of Jesus Christ was deemed so important by our ancient forebears in the faith that they made it a part of the earliest Christian creeds, and so today as we say what we believe, we will note that 'he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.' Early Christians saw the Ascension as a promise of great things to come' for all who belong to Jesus Christ and as a 'guarantee that we will all find resurrection eventually in Christ.'¹

The Ascension was also a favorite of John Calvin and in reflecting on the Ascension, Calvin writes that Christ 'removed his bodily presence from our sight, not so as to leave without help believers who still have to live on earth, but to rule the world with a power even more present than before. Certainly his promise to be with us to the end of the age has been fulfilled by his ascension, for as by it his body was lifted above all the heavens, so its power and effectiveness reach far beyond all bounds of heaven and earth.'² As Christ is ascended his power reaches far the bounds of heaven and earth. The ascension of Christ is not a divine magic trick, but a promise that our humanity will be exalted too, it is a glimpse of our future that we too shall be made fully alive in Jesus Christ. The early church father living in France in the 2nd century, Irenaeus is known for saying that the 'glory of God is humanity full alive.' The Glory of God is humanity full alive, fully exalted, fully able to flourish in the presence of God, and the ascension of Christ, far from taking the humanity of Christ away from us, releases in this world the power to make Christ more present than ever before. One would think that the fullest encounter with Christ would have occurred in his own lifetime, but according to what we believe about the Ascension, we receive Christ through a power even more present than he was with those in his own lifetime and resurrection appearances, and this power promises us to be

¹ John S. McClure, 'The Ascension—a promise of great things to come,' in *Presbyterians Today* (2002).

² John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (1541), 253.

with us to the end of the age and exalt our humanity with his before God. Christ's Ascension is a central reminder to us that 'the Glory of God is humanity fully alive.'

Sometimes it is hard to see what humanity fully alive looks like in our world. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by death, by self-destruction, by a humanity overtaken by despair, a humanity captive to its own pain and hatred. Last Sunday afternoon I watched a colleague in ministry at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Hills address his congregation the Sunday after a live shooter opened fire at the Irvine Taiwanese Presbyterian Church with whom they share a campus. After acknowledging the heinous act, the pastor, Steve Marsh generously welcomed all to the service and then said this: 'the circumstances are very different this Sunday than last Sunday...our Christian community has been rocked, but we gather today, to not focus on death, but to focus on the power of the resurrection, that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead has conquered death...hate loses, love wins.' One of the reasons that statement rings true is because such love took embodied form in the very moment of the shooting when Dr. John Cheng, a 52 year-old doctor, visiting with his parents, took his life into his own hands and charged the shooter, saving countless lives in that Taiwanese Presbyterian congregation but giving up his own. The glory of God is humanity fully alive.

On Wednesday as I was entering into the final stretch of a year-long carpool run, the last week of school drop-offs, I received a communication from my sister saying she did not know how I was able to take my kids to school today — 'I just can't imagine as a parent what you all must be feeling.' I don't know if you have ever been to Uvalde, Texas, but I have. They were one of our rivals growing up in high school and I played football and baseball games there during my high school years. Uvalde is about 90 miles west of San Antonio on the same Highway 90 that runs through New Orleans. Other than being the birthplace of actor Matthew McConaughey and a community that values the brightness of Friday Night Lights, Uvalde is an ordinary small Texas small town with a majority Mexican-American population sitting about 60 miles north of the U.S./Mexico border. When the news first came up about the shooting in Uvalde after the shooting in Laguna Woods and the shooting intentionally targeting African-Americans in Buffalo, after seeing the long list of mass shootings across our country just since Columbine in 1998, after receiving that communication from my sister as I was mindlessly moving through the school carpool, a sad reality began to gnaw at me. Was this vision of what it means to be a fully alive human being affecting my own? Was I experiencing numbness in the overwhelming repetitions of these deadly events throughout this country? Was I resigned to live in a world because of sheer frequency, where we shrug our shoulders and say 'not my kid,' 'I don't know anyone who lives in Irvine or Uvalde or Buffalo,' 'Let's not characterize the whole bunch bad when it's only a few bad apples.'

A generation ago, the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente health care in California published a groundbreaking study about Adverse Childhood Experiences (also known as ACEs) and how children from ages infant to four that experienced or were

exposed to physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, were exponentially more likely to have difficulty learning to read, write, and excel in school, were more likely to have behavior challenges themselves in the classroom, and in many cases were more likely to suffer from chronic health problems and reach a much shorter life expectancy. Just a few years ago, sociologist Robert Putnam author of *Bowling Alone* published the book *Our Kids: the American Dream in Crisis* in which he looked at several communities across the United States, Midwest, South, East and West, and discovered that while children who are given opportunities today are going to excel and achieve even greater than those generations ago, children who grow up in poverty and dysfunction today have fewer on-ramps to opportunity and overcoming their circumstances than children who grew up in poverty a generation or two before. On top of that Putnam writes that ‘because of growing class segregation in America (especially compared to previous generations), fewer and fewer successful people (and even fewer of our children) have much idea how the other half lives. So we are less empathetic than we should be to the plight of less privileged kids.’³

But what do mass shootings, the children of Uvalde, Texas, and Adverse Childhood Experiences have to do with the ascension of Jesus Christ? Everything. In our passage today in verse eight, the risen Christ promises to the gathered community in his presence, ‘you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ In other words, as easy as it is to numb ourselves and sedate ourselves to the pain of the world, Jesus tells us that we have responsibility not only within the friendly confines of our church community, but for all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, and that includes schools in Uvalde and grocery stores in Buffalo, New York, and immigrant churches in Irvine, California. As easy as it may be to distract ourselves and change the channel and turn away, we have responsibility in some form or fashion to offer to the people in those communities the vision that the glory of God is humanity fully alive and that means none of us can resign ourselves to live and exist as if the numbness that eats away at all of us is the normal way of life in this world. To numbly take in events like we have seen as just part and parcel of life’s normal experiences in 21st century America is unacceptable.

Sallie Watson, a Presbyterian pastor and executive for Mission Presbytery wrote this week of attending the prayer vigil at First Presbyterian Church, Uvalde, on Thursday evening. She brought prayer shawls, pocket shawls, and finger worms for children from churches in San Antonio. Over two hundred thirty people joined the service livestream, people from coast to coast, from Canada and Puerto Rico stopped what they were doing to help a community grieve, heal, and love, if only from afar. Sallie concluded her

³ Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, 230.

reflection this way: 'I'm still grieving. As wonderful as the experience was, though, none of this should have happened. Ever.' Because the glory of God is humanity full alive, because hate will lose and love finds a way to win, because the beloved community is not just something to one day aspire toward, because the presence of Christ, according to his ascension, is more present than ever before and wills take root right here in this world, here, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, because of all that, that includes Uvalde, Texas, Buffalo, New York, and Laguna Woods, California.

Sometimes the Christian community cannot resign ourselves to live in a world that allows the numbness to eat away at us. We cannot pretend that Christ ascended only to be aloof from such unpleasant unrealities...nor can we believe he would ever let us off the hook for them either. We may feel numb in the carpool line, but they are all our kids. And we have the responsibility to work for a world, on multiple fronts, not just on mental health and gun control, but multiple fronts, where going to school does not make our lives expendable, and where the gift to flourish before God and to be fully alive is not a benefit for the select few, but an outcome we seek for all, in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Amen.