

Heaven and Earth

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

May 12, 2024

The Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

In describing the themes of his most recent best-selling novel, *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*, author James McBride highlights the intersection between historic African American and Jewish American communities, the ways that we understand or don't understand disability in our culture as well as the complicated relationships between people who live with and love each other across cultural boundaries.

Set primarily in the historic Chicken Hill neighborhood of Pottstown Pennsylvania in the 1920s and 30s, in my reading of it it is a story all about the power that comes from really being present in the lives of one another.

Exploring the ways that the Jewish community began to physically separate itself from the African American community in the early 20th Century, the book mainly centers on the character of Chona. Chona's father had been the original proprietor of the Heaven and Earth Grocery store in Chicken Hill. After his death and her marriage to a local nightclub owner, Moshe, Chona insists that they stay in Chicken Hill, and that they keep the store open as they lived in what we would now call a food desert. That as a family they do all that they could to be generous and loving to their neighbors. Afflicted with polio as a child, Chona carried the remnants of that disease in her body for the rest of her life, but it didn't impact her capacity to give of herself to her neighbors.

Basing her on historical progressive Jewish women of the period, McBride describes her character as someone who understood how to use the limited power that she had.

The novel describes her in this way "Chona had never been one to play by the rules of American society. She did not experience the world as most people did. To her, the world was not a china closet where you admire this and don't touch that. Rather, she saw it as a place where every act of living was a chance for tikkun olam, to repair the world. The tiny woman with the bad foot was all soul."¹

¹ McBride, James. *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*. Random House. 2023

It is after Chona's death, her life given to protect the most vulnerable person in their neighborhood, that the community that she has been dedicated to, the people who she had loved, take it into their own hands, in honor of her legacy, to enact justice and reclaim their own limited power in the world. Compelled by all the acts of kindness and resistance they witnessed from her in her life, when she is gone they come to reflect her spirit and her passion for changing their particular corner of the world.

Here at the start of the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples find themselves in a similar pivotal moment in their lives. Their friend and teacher gave them all of himself. His every act was a gesture toward repairing the world. And after years spent sharing their lives, and even sharing an extended season spent in his presence after the resurrection, the moment has come for Jesus to leave, and for them to be about the work of reflecting his legacy and teachings to the ends of the earth. New Testament scholar Joseph Fitzmeyer writes, "The ascension is the inauguration of the time of the church when testimony must be given to Christ during all its times of storms and stress, peace and growth."²

The author of Acts goes out of his way to ensure that the reader understands that the disciples were themselves eyewitnesses to Jesus' bodily ascension into the clouds. Language related to vision is repeated throughout: that they were looking on, that he went out of their sight, that they were even staring into the sky looking for him after he had gone.

It is the most charming and realistic part of the surreal and apocalyptic story - when wide-eyed and likely slack-jawed the disciples are confronted by two angels who ask them how long they plan to just stand around looking up at nothing. In my imaginative reading of the story, the disciples then look one another in the eyes and realize they now only have each other - and together they will bear the responsibility for carrying the message of Jesus Christ to the next generation and beyond.

The theology of the ascension developed rather late in the story of the Early Church. It especially gained traction in response to those who would later be

² Fitzmeyer, Joseph. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Yale University Press. 1998.

identified as heretics who believed that Jesus was never really connected to the physical or bodily life of humanity and that Jesus even came to liberate human beings from the bonds of the created world. Instead, the church doubled down on the bodily incarnation, bodily suffering, bodily death, bodily resurrection, and finally the bodily ascension of Jesus Christ. Patristic theologian Irenaeus wrote in the second century that the “Son of God did not reject human nature or exalt himself above it, but united himself with nature in order to unite us to God.”

In the ascension then we believe not just that Jesus is seated on the right hand of God the Father almighty, but that his real presence is now among us and within us in all places throughout the earth. That a part of us has gone with him to join our Creator and a real part of him and his real presence is always and forever in our midst.

Australian indigenous artist Shirley Purdie, featured on our bulletin cover this morning draws on her cultural tradition to locate the presence of Christ within the skin of her land. Her work is painted with the earth, as she collects ochres from the land and mixes them with glue to attach the canvases. This particular piece, *Ngambuny Ascends*, places the Ascension of Jesus (Ngambuny) within the local landscape of western Australia. Art historian Rod Pennenden describes this particular piece in this way:

“What is striking about Purdie’s work is its capacity to articulate her local landscape as the site for the divine story. The drama of the scene is shaped within the forms of the landscape and most centrally by a dense swathe of black ochre that locates the image in space and time. European eyes would by convention be looking to the sky, as this is the pathway by which Jesus ascends into heaven attended by puffy clouds and soft pink and blue lights. In stark contrast to this, the space for ascension is rendered black, like skin, like crevices in the rock, like a void open to receive. Such void spaces appear as spaces for strong dreaming, as water holes that sustain life or, in this case, as the place where the land receives the Spirit of Christ returning. Ngambuny, the Christ figure, does not ascend into the sky but back into the land where God as Creator Spirit resides. Christ does not go to a God in heaven, removed from human and social life. Rather, Christ is alive in the land. Some Aboriginal

people point out the oddity of heaven even being in the sky. They believe that when they die their spirit goes back to their Homeland, which is their promised land, their heaven.”³

Just two weeks ago, five of us from BMPC traveled to be present with our mission partners in Lima Peru. Joining Hands Peru is a networking organization that equips and connects local often solitary environmental activists fighting to protect their homeland's sacredness and health, faced with governmental corruption, unregulated industry, and unethical extraction methods. The hope of the Worldwide Ministries Committee, who leads us in this process, is that over the next year and in the years ahead, we will all become familiar with and engaged in the shared advocacy and companionship that can be created by partnering in a new way.

In this new way of partnering, there is a primary focus not on financial support, though we have committed significant financial resources to their work, but instead on building relationships through study, visits, and witnessing to the work of these activists. During our trip, we spent five days being physically present at sites in the Callao section of Lima and one site in LaOroya up in the mountains, where we saw polluted rivers and beaches, remnants of oil spills, factories and smelters poisoning workers and children, and mountain top removals destroying the natural habitat. This summer nine high school students and five adults will go back to learn and serve side by side with Peruvian youth in an effort to instill in both groups of young people that they are Compañeros - fellow travelers - in the work of environmental justice.

We all knew that the focus of our trip would be to be present with one another, to listen to the stories of the activists and communities, to better understand their goals and visions beyond what we could ever understand from a Zoom call or written update, and to communicate to them that we - that all of us - support the difficult and thankless work that they are doing to repair creation and heal their communities. But I didn't realize how significant it would be for us to physically see and with our eyes bear to witness to the sacredness of the earth and the work that they have before them.

³ <https://artway.eu/content.php?id=1777&lang=en&action=show>

On trips like these I tend to take a camera with me that gives people the impression that I am a really good photographer. While it looks very fancy when you see me change the camera's lens, I am not all that confident in my skills. But from the very first site visit, it was clear that the camera that I had brought was essential to what it meant for us to see and record their work. We visited endangered wetlands on our first day, and the leader of that project, Sandra, walked me to each spot where buildings were being erected illegally endangering the wildlife. Sandra asked me to use that camera to bear witness to it. The next day while visiting one of the most polluted beaches in all of Latin America, I would hear the cry from the leader of that site, Maria, "*hermana, aqi* - sister over here," as she walked me to each place that she wanted me to document. The first day we met Maria she was wearing a t-shirt that quoted Genesis 1:31 in Spanish - *God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*

On our last day of site visits Jed Koball, our PCUSA Mission Co-Worker who hosted us and is on staff for Joining Hands, told me that the morning visit - mountain top removal on the Hills of Ventanilla - would just be a talk and not really anything to see from the bottom of the mountain. From the bottom, you can't see the damage being done to the 300 acres of natural biodiversity. An international mining company began removing stone from the mountains several years ago, and each year you can visibly see the green of the mountains fading away. But Jed said, the extraction is high up in the middle of the mountains so it can only be seen if you climb up into the site.

We arrived at the base of the hills and our group and a collection of activists all poured out of the minibus, and there was much conversation in Spanish. It turns out the plan was to climb up the mountain that morning. Joan - the most responsible of our group - decided to stay at the van, rather than risk the climb on loose sand and stone. Sulamita, a leader in the movement happily agreed to keep her company. But the rest of us began the journey to the top. It was pretty rough. It was hot and sunny and slippery, and I sat down more than once for breaks, all the while reminding myself of the importance of seeing and bearing witness to the ecological devastation these folks were working against. I had to carry that camera up the mountain. Unfortunately, almost at the very top, I realized I needed to not keep going, and so while others continued on, I sat and drank my water and Maria - the one who called me sister- stayed to make sure I was okay.

Maria speaks no English, and my Spanish is non-existent, so we sat together on what felt like the top of the world in silence. She gestured to me to take deep breaths through my nose, and just patiently waited until I was able to continue on. It was such a lovely intimate moment, as we sat together - two women who had just met a few days before but who were united by the same call to bear witness to the sacredness of the earth and the need to protect it.

Joan will also tell you that she chose the better part that day, not because she didn't have to climb the mountain, but because she and Sulamita walked until they could find a strong WIFI signal and spend the time it took us to walk up and back down the mountain, using Google translate to share the stories and photos of their lives with one another - truly and genuinely being present together.

Their stories are compelling, and we look forward to more opportunities to share them with the church. Indeed, each of the leaders we met and came to know were men and women who are learning how to leverage their limited power in this world, especially when they work alongside one another.

The power, the leverage, the asset that we have to offer to them is our willingness to be truly present with them and with one another and to bear witness to what we have seen with our own eyes.

This was the call to the Disciples on the top of their mountain that day of the ascension. To see with their own eyes and to witness to the real presence of Jesus Christ in heaven and on the earth. This is our work as well - to offer to God, to the church, to our partners our seemingly most scarce resource - our attention. To give thanks for the ways that our life of faith calls us to be present in our own particular corner of the world and in the sacred and scarred places around the world, and to hold onto hope that by witnessing to the power of Jesus Christ to repair what is broken, to heal the places we have damaged, that we ourselves might be transformed and made new.

Amen.