

Easter 7B: Feast of the Ascension
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The Future of Bodies

A colleague of mine is the Bible professor at a small Christian college. Despite the fact that his focus is on, he is often asked questions which are more...pastoral...than biblical in nature. One such question he received began with the preface, “Can I ask you something *personal*?” Whenever someone starts off with that, you know you have to be ready for anything, because there’s no telling where the conversation might go, or *how* “personal” it might get. The conversation might be about romantic relationships or personal devotional practice or career choices. It might be about suffering—real suffering—in the student’s life, if they’ve just encountered disease and death for the first time and are trying to make sense of it. Sometimes the conversation is about something entirely different.

The conversation the student initiated that day turned out to be one of the last sort. The student launched in: “Should I get a tattoo or not, ‘cause all my friends have one, but my dad says I shouldn’t ‘cause the Bible says I can’t, and he says that I should talk to a pastor if I don’t believe him.” She said this with all the care and sensitivity of a Gatling gun.

Clearly, this student was searching for ammunition in a family argument. Any attempt to nuance her father’s reading of the Bible would have been interpreted as giving permission; and any expression of caution—“you know your father has a point”—would have in all likelihood ended the talk prematurely.

So after a quick prayer for wisdom, the professor replied. “I’ll answer you if you will answer a question for me first. Why do you want to mark your body?”

“It’s not like anyone is going to see it,” the student countered.

“OK. Fair enough. I don’t care where it goes. I just want to know why you want to mark your body.”

“I dunno. ‘Cause it’s my body and I want to.”

In other contexts, the question of whether or not to get a tattoo might have led to a fruitful discussion about what it means to be made in God’s image, to be gradually conformed to the image of Christ, about how to understand that he was *marked* for us in his suffering, about how we are *marked* by Christ in baptism, and whether any of these truths change how we might think about being marked with a tattoo. But here, my colleague recognized, there was another, more fundamental matter at issue.

Recall how the student justified her desire to get a tattoo: “‘Cause it’s my body and I want to.” Behind this statement is a fundamental assumption about the nature of faith and of salvation and of human existence, in particular one which makes a distinction between the self and the body, between the public and the private. This student likely believed that faith is an inner, private, “spiritual” thing, where “spiritual” means immaterial. Jesus then makes no claim on our bodies,

but only our “hearts,” our souls. Our bodies, in this way of thinking, then become basically instruments, tools. We “use” them. We “do” things with them. They do not constitute our selves. They’re not who we are. They are rather just one more means of self-expression, a way to express our true ‘inner self.’

The student who approached my colleague likely would not have put it so baldly or even thought through her assumptions and their relation to Christian faith. Likely if asked, she would have confessed orthodox belief in Christ. Yet in her justification for wanting a tattoo, she was giving voice, not to a Christian worldview, but to the assumptions of the culture in which she is in, which we are in. This view sees a division between body and soul, between what we believe and our daily, public practice, what we do. This view confines “religion” to that which we do on Sunday morning, to worship only. We are expected to keep church separate from career and faith separate from our work in the world. What’s worse, few Christians see this disintegration as problematic.

So, the professor, perceiving the problem of these assumptions, asked the student a question he hoped would get at those assumptions, “What do you think Jesus’ Ascension into heaven has to say about your getting a tattoo?” The student was caught up short by the question, and went silent as she pondered what he asked, until she gave up and walked away. She had no idea what the Ascension had to do with tattoos or with bodies in general.

And she’s not alone in this. Most Christians, I suspect, couldn’t answer that question either. Part of that is due to how little attention the Ascension gets in most churches. Sure, we affirm Jesus’ Ascension every time we say the creed, “and he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father,” and we may come across one of the accounts in a Bible study or in private devotions. But few churches give any attention to the Ascension or even note the day of its commemoration on the church calendar. This is larger than just congregations, though. Just try to find serious scholarly works on Christ’s ascension. Amazon.com had a whopping total of five books last time I looked—three of which were by the same author and one which was written in 1923! Shows how much importance the Church today gives to the Ascension and its significance to the Christian life!

Admittedly, the story of Jesus’ Ascension is an odd story. Luke recounts the event twice, once in his gospel and again in the book of Acts, both of which we just read. Though the two versions differ in their details, both say that Jesus was with his disciples after his resurrection, they were having an important theological conversation about when God’s rule will be established on earth, and all of a sudden Jesus is taken up, rises right before their eyes, up into heaven. It’s not clear in Luke’s telling what we are to make of what happened to Jesus. For, what does it mean to say that Jesus “ascended,” was “carried up to heaven,” “lifted up to the heavens”? Was it like a balloon that has been set free, rising higher and higher, till he was little more than a dot in the sky? Did he just disappear into the clouds, floating there in the upper atmosphere? Or perhaps he was just beamed up by aliens?

If we are to make any sense of the Ascension, the first thing we need to understand is that, for Luke’s original audience, the point of the Ascension is not so much the *direction* as the *destination*. In describing Christ’s ascension, Luke’s account in Acts says he was “taken up into

a cloud.” The cloud, most scholars agree, recalls the cloud that came down on the tabernacle constructed by Moses, and the cloud that followed the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness, and the cloud that filled Solomon’s temple at its dedication. In each previous instance, the cloud symbolized God’s glory—the Shekinah—the manifest presence of God. Thus for Jesus to enter the “cloud” is synonymous with entering into heaven, into the immediate presence of the Lord. Indeed, for all the appeal to spatial language—“up,” “above”—heaven is understood throughout the Bible to be not so much a place, as it is a “higher” plane of existence, a dimension of reality where God’s glory is fully manifest. A world right next to this one, or above this one, that we don’t see but which interpenetrates our world. In “ascending into heaven,” the point isn’t that Jesus has entered orbit, but that he has entered into the fullness of God’s presence.

Besides the destination, Luke’s original audience would have also focused on the *delivery*, that is to say, the fact that upon his ascension, Jesus brought with him his glorified body. Jesus, having been born human, having died a human death, and having been resurrected by God in his human body, has now been taken up into heaven *in bodily form*. He hasn’t sloughed off his humanity upon coming to heaven. Jesus remains fully human, in human flesh. This is to say, the Incarnation continues, even in heaven.

In fact, it’s not just that the Incarnation continues after the Ascension, but the Ascension *completes* the Incarnation; it’s the culmination of the work God began in becoming human. When Christ became man, he took upon himself a human body and then took that human body into heaven. And, through his body, Jesus shared in human nature, the whole of humanity, which was then taken into God. And as a result we humans are now enabled to share in the life of God. Just as God partook our human nature in the Incarnation, in the Ascension, we are invited to become “partakers of divine nature,” to quote the Second Letter of Peter. It’s as if in the Incarnation, God grabbed hold of human nature, and in the Ascension he pulled human nature up to him, took it up *into* God.

It’s like when you have a shirt sleeve or pant leg that is turned inside-out: you stick your hand through the leg, grab the end and pull it back out. Human nature, like this pant leg, has been turned inside out by sin. So God comes down to us in our sin, reaches down into the dark hole of our fallen existence, grabs hold of our human nature at the Incarnation, and pulls it out, back up, until it is right-side out.

The Ascension then isn’t just about something that happened to Jesus but something that happens to us, too. Christ has gone up in our name and in our skin, and has opened to us the way home, the way to perfection, to glorification at the right hand of God. This elevation is the end to which Jesus’ work was always pointed. Jesus came down that we might be taken up to God. And so, to *destination* and *delivery*, we need to add a third feature of the Ascension—*destiny*. For Christ’s ascent into heaven, to sit beside the Father, reveals God’s ultimate will for us, to be taken up to share with God in the divine life.

This is the essential meaning of the Ascension: Christ has ascended into heaven, into God’s presence, bringing with him human nature, so that we humans might follow him there—*Destination, Delivery, and Destiny*. St. Cyril of Alexandria said as much when he described the

importance of Christ's Ascension: "He was carried up into heaven, that He might share the Father's throne even with the flesh that was united to Him. And this new pathway the Word made for us when he appeared in human form. And hereafter in due time He will come again in the glory of His Father with the angels, and will take us up to be with him."

This says a lot about the nature of salvation and it says a lot about the place our bodies have in salvation. If it wasn't clear when God *dignified* human nature by uniting himself to humanity in the flesh, the fact that Jesus took that human flesh with him into heaven, elevated it and gave it a permanent place of honor at the right hand of the Father underlines the importance of our bodies and their destiny in God.

In Christianity, our bodies matter. They are not just something we use or possess. Our bodies are how we interact with the world and with God. They are where we encounter God and have communion with him. Indeed, the promise Christ offers is not to be saved from our bodies, but to be *saved in them*.

Now, this may not seem like good news to everyone. To those who feel trapped in their bodies, who, because of age or disease or just ol' wear and tear, feel their bodies are a barrier to full living, a burden, a bad fit, even a pain—to such as these, the fact that Christianity refuses to envision a life apart from the body can seem like a sentence to eternal imprisonment. But that's not what the Ascension shows us. Rather, what we see in the Ascension is the redemption of our bodies, the hope for human flesh—our bodies restored, cleansed, sanctified, and taken up into God to share in God's eternal life.

So, whether you are an older person who's adjusting to the challenges of getting older or a college student pondering a lifetime commitment to a tattoo, Jesus' Ascension has an important message for you. It speaks to the dignity of our bodies and their redemption and glorification in Christ.

Now, this doesn't explicitly answer the question of whether or not Christians should get tattoos. But it does mean that what we do with our bodies matters. It's not irrelevant to our life with God. For, as the Ascension shows, our bodies are included in God's plan of salvation, indeed they are central to the new life God has in store for us. Thanks be to God!