

Ascension Eve Sermon – PLTS  
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Gary Pence

Luke 24:44-53

*Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

Some of you have probably heard more than you would ever have chosen to hear this semester about my grandson Sam, the cute little two-year-old that plays with me 2-3 days a week. But when I contemplate the Festival of Ascension—which occurs tomorrow, but which we observe proleptically and fortuitously today—I realize that little Sammy would love the Festival of Ascension.

Now you may think Sammy would love the Festival of Ascension because of the worship hoopla, the processions and the torch bearers and the brassily triumphal music, . . . and I guess he probably would like all that. But what he would LOVE is the real Ascension Day, with Jesus wafting upward on a cloud—as in Giotto’s quaint rendering on the front of our worship folder—and then disappearing into the ether. “Where Jesus go, Tapa?” he would ask me, “Where Jesus go?” For Sammy, Jesus’ Ascension would provide just one more round of hide and seek.

I don’t know for sure why it is, but Sammy’s all-time favorite game right now is hiding and seeking, disappearing and finding, pretending to be gone and pretending to be found. He plays this game by the hour with me with his grandma, with Curious George, and with Elmo. He will put his little friend Elmo under an available blanket or pillow and then he will hand Curious George to me and say, “Where Elmo go, George? Where Elmo?” And then, while he will look on with amusement and eager anticipation, I will have George go through excruciating efforts to find Elmo.

Where’s Elmo? He was here just a minute ago. And now he’s lost. He’s gone. Where could he be? Is he under the altar? No. Is he behind the pulpit? Is he with the president? No. Elmo, where are you? He doesn’t answer. Hey, wait a minute! What’s that lump under the blanket? Did I see it move? I thought I saw it move. Did I hear something from under that blanket? I thought I heard some rustling? I’ll check under that blanket. It’s . . . it’s . . . it’s Elmo!!!

And when we finally find Elmo amid rejoicing and sounds of celebration, Sammy will thrust him back under the blanket or pillow for another round, “Where Elmo go, George?” and we start all over again. In the course of the next hour George will hide and Elmo will look for him; Sammy will hide and Elmo, George, and Tapa, i.e. “Grandpa” will hunt for him; or I will hide and Sammy will hunt for me. Sometimes it’s a full-blown hide and seek with Sammy saying, “1-2-3-4-5-6 (that’s as far as he can count right now), ready-r-not, here I come,” and then going through the whole script, “Hmmm! Where Tapa? Is he under the table? Noooo. Is he behind the sofa? Noooo. Is he in the closet? Nooo. Hey, wait a minute! Did I see something move? Did I hear something? It’s Tapa!!!”

So Sam would love Jesus' Ascension, i.e. his disappearance, his hiding, his pretending to be gone, when in fact we might just see something move or hear some sort of rustling that suggests he isn't so far away at all. That's Sammy's kind of game.

Psychologists tell us that children like games of hide and seek partly because they are intrigued with object constancy or object permanence, the question of whether an object continues to exist when it disappears from view. Infants lack object constancy. For them, when something disappears it ceases to exist. It is no more. If it appears again, its reappearance is magical, unintelligible, mysterious, not part of a continuum continuing to extend between appearances.

Sometime in the first year infants begin to imagine something existing even when out of sight. If you show them a red ball moving along a track and have it disappear behind a card placed in front of the track, their eyes will shift to the other end of the card, where they wait for the red ball momentarily to reappear. Even though they can no longer see the red ball, they expect it to continue moving along the track behind the card and to reemerge into view on the other side. The eyes of young infants don't shift in that way. For them the ball is just gone.

Even as adults we are fascinated by object permanence, by the nature of presence and absence. People will talk of feeling closer to a father or a mother after their death than they were while they were still alive. Sometimes remembered or even imagined experiences are more intense and more "real" than the actual experiences themselves.

Because this is the end of term and it is a time of leave-takings—some for perhaps a summer vacation or sabbatical semester, some for an internship year, some for good—we are at the point of saying our good-byes and our godspeeds, and we are needing to recover for ourselves our trust in object permanence, our assurance that even when we are no longer face-to-face, we have not ceased to exist for one another, that we are not annihilated, but rather—especially for those about to receive calls or appointments somewhere across the face of the land—we have simply ascended to a better place. On such a day we may want to say to one another, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The earliest Church, like us, was particularly fascinated with the object permanence of Jesus. Now you see him; now you don't could be a theme of his story. Particularly after his execution his followers had to figure out whether he was dead and gone or whether he had only hidden himself, "Where Jesus go? Tapa" It's interesting to see how the four gospels dealt differently with the question.

Mark describes an empty tomb, but offers no further appearances of a risen Jesus. Matthew, Luke, and John all tell versions of the empty tomb story, but Matthew offers almost nothing afterward, little more than Mark did: He has Jesus meet the two Marys briefly as they are running from the empty tomb to tell the disciples what they have witnessed, and then there are only the 5-6 verses that Professor Smith read as a final stylized resurrection appearance on a mountain (Where else in Matthew's gospel?), and there the risen Jesus delivers his last brief speech. Luke and John provide multiple appearances of the risen Jesus in diverse settings, but only Luke-Acts offers an Ascension and a Pentecost.

Luke-Acts, the gospel for the long haul, felt a special need to explain the real absence of Jesus from his community. Jesus had not returned, as Paul and others of the earliest Christians had expected. Did he continue to exist? Where should his followers direct their eyes to find him? Was he behind the card, from which they might still expect him momentarily to emerge, or was he simply dead and gone forever?

Luke-Acts' answer is Ascension and Pentecost: Jesus has "withdrawn" from them; he has been removed from view, "lifted up" till "a cloud took him out of their sight," or he was "taken up from them into heaven." Then his followers were to wait for the day of Pentecost, when the risen and ascended Jesus would pour out the Spirit so that everyone everywhere could "see and hear." [Acts 2:33]. The continuing presence of the Holy Spirit resolves the question of Jesus' object permanence for Luke-Acts.

The author of Ephesians [1: 20-23] equates Jesus' transfer from earth to heaven as a coronation, Jesus' seating next to God "above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is to be named" so that "all things are under his feet" and he is "the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." Here, it seems, Jesus' object permanence is to be found simultaneously in his transcendent identity with the divine Lord of all, or, if we prefer Tillich's reformulation, his identity with the Ground of all Being.

According to the author of Ephesians, Jesus' object permanence is also found in the church, which the author calls Jesus' "body," and his "fullness." If you want to see Jesus, the author suggests, look around you at the faithful gathered together this morning in this room. But in this author's cosmic vision, Jesus' permanent presence is not found only here within the community of his followers; it is found in everything, because this same Jesus who fills the church also "fills all in all."

Apparently Jesus lifted his feet off the soil of Palestine so that "all things"—the whole universe—could be under his feet. The one who appeared in ancient Palestine and disappeared into heaven or who knows where now suffuses, inspires, vivifies, and empowers the whole cosmos. "Where Jesus, Tapa?" "Hmmm, let's see. Is he under the blanket? Yes. Is he under the table? Yes. Is he behind the sofa? Yes. Is he inside Tapa's shirt? Yes. Is he in the bread and beverage about to be passed around among this community this morning? Yes. Is he in the fields of wheat and in the vineyards from which this meal was harvested? Yes. Is he off in the heavens we can scan with our telescopes, in the galaxies beyond our knowledge? Yes. Hey. Wait a minute! Is there anywhere at all that he is not? No. There's Jesus!"

When it comes to a game of hide and seek, little Sammy, I must confess, has a longer attention span than I do. He will hide and seek by the hour. He seems almost never to tire of it. It's a game he will play without ceasing. It's a game I think he prays without ceasing. I am trying to learn from him the mysteries of presence and absence, of appearing and disappearing, of how pretending to be lost and gone and then to be found is such a delightful meditation for him. Something to be practiced and savored without ceasing.

Perhaps it is this Ascension Festival that provides the key. Ascension is not about levitation or space travel—Beam me up, Scotty!—, it's not about transport at all. It's about how this human being from ancient Galilee should enter our lives here in Berkeley today and everyday as the linchpin of our lives. Object permanence is revealed as subject permanence, as we find ourselves faithfully, dependably, consistently, and surprisingly addressed by inalienable compassion and love. Ascension may be about a coronation to power and majesty; that's one way to see it. But it's also about an ordination into universally accessible compassionate presence. The Palestinian one for others has become the presence of love and hope for all.

So maybe hide and seek is not actually the game Sammy is playing. Maybe it's not really about whether Elmo or Curious George or Tapa or even Sammy will be lost and then found. Sammy knows where they are the whole time. He is pretending and he knows it. He grins slyly when I ask him if he knows where Elmo is, and he says, "No." We are engaged together in a play, and he enjoys the performance. He is learning the script. So it's not literally about hiding, the seeking, and finding.

It's about a story he and I are constructing together, a full-fledged story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It's a predictable story, all the more predictable for its endless repetitions, just like the ancient myths performed in Greek tragedy or the archetypal tales portrayed in cinema or video today.

And in the acting out of the story, Sam and I are constructing the contours of our life together. We are delighting one another. But, even more, we are making a life together. In our play we are sharing our affection and our care for one another. We are being more deeply present to each

other. We are weaving the bonds of grandfather and grandson, adding strands, testing their strength, proving their tenacity and trustworthiness.

Ascension Day is something like that. Look again at Giotto's painting. This is also play, also pretend. Giotto is imagining a scene in which all these people—people on earth and people in heaven—are wholly attuned to this Jesus, his feet obscured by a cloud, disappearing upward into the heavens. The arms of the heavenly band sweep up like his. The disciples on earth, dressed in opulent robes, fix their gaze on Jesus, their hands in prayerful obeisance.

Two angels face away from the ascending Jesus about to make their speech, "Galileans, why do you stand looking into heaven?"

Giotto's scene is stylized, ritualized. It is as much a play and a pretend as my games of hide and seek with Sammy. And like those games, it is really about the bonds being woven between Jesus and us. Along with the figures in the painting, we are drawn to this Jesus. We catch from them their sense of awe, and with them we experience the hope and assurance that come from already knowing the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story—the story of Emmanuel, God-with-us, here with us today, with us everyday in whatever place we may find ourselves, with us in every moment of our lives, in every terror and every triumph, with us always, to the end of the age.

"Where Jesus go, Tapa?"

"Nowhere, Sammy. He's right here with us always, just like Elmo and George, just like you and me."