

THE LAST MEMORY

Luke 24:44–53

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on May 28, 2017, the Ascension of the Lord,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

Then [Jesus] 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 worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

On this weekend of memory and flags, of concert and parade, may the words and music of this service lift us into your presence, bless us, and lead us to be a blessing for others. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

I.

One of the underappreciated aspects of the Christian faith – and of the stages of the life and destiny of Jesus Christ – is the ascension.

- Even those barely initiated into faith know the story of Christ’s birth.
- We know the story of his death.
- We know the story of his resurrection.

But even though after we say “on the third day he *arose* again from the dead” we add “he *ascended* into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty,” few of us distinguish between the resurrection – when the church is full and lilies are in bloom – and the ascension forty days later, on a weekday, when the pace of spring activities has accelerated, the peace of summer is within sight, and graduation parties abound throughout the neighborhood. With good weather, it is easy for ascension to get lost.

But consider this:

- If Christ had only been raised from the dead, he would have continued to live and lead the disciples in and around Jerusalem, presumably, preaching, teaching and healing.
- If Christ had only been raised from the dead, he either, like Lazarus¹, would have died again (then what would have happened?!); or he would have lived forever and become known for his *longevity* in life rather than *victory* over death.
- If Christ had only been raised from the dead, it is unlikely that Christianity would have spread from its birthplace within Palestinian Judaism and become the world religion it has become.

¹ John 11.

Christ's ascension has several Old Testament parallels:

- It occurs forty days after his resurrection – commemorating Israel's four hundred years of slavery,² forty years of wandering in the wilderness,³ and Christ's own forty days of temptation and testing.⁴
- When Christ ascends into heaven, it is reminiscent of Elijah the prophet ascending in a whirlwind, accompanied by chariots of fire.⁵
- When Elijah leaves the mantle of prophesy behind to fall upon his successor Elisha, it is like Christ leaving the mantle of preaching and teaching and healing behind to fall upon his disciples, a mantle they passed on to us for our day and time.

Yet for all its importance, only Luke narrates the ascension of Christ, once at the conclusion of his gospel and once at the beginning of the book of Acts. His ascension narratives are sparse:

From Luke:

Then [Jesus] 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 from Acts:

When [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.⁶

Sparse narrative of an unsparse event.

Ten days later, the gift of the spirit is given at Pentecost – which we will celebrate next Sunday – and with that the disciples begin their mission of bearing witness to Christ throughout the earth. In a sense the church is born and Christianity takes off – all after the ascension.⁷

II.

Today I want to focus briefly on one aspect of the ascension: the aspect of *blessing*. Specifically, Luke says:

While [Jesus] was *blessing* [his disciples], he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

- The last experience the disciples have of Christ *in person* is the ascension.
- The last memory they have is thus of him blessing them.
- The last memory is the memory of being blessed.

Christ's ascension occurs *while he is in the act of blessing* those who have been closest to them.

²The first half of the book of Exodus recounts the experience of slavery.

³ The wilderness experience is found in the second half of Exodus and much of Numbers.

⁴ See Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13; and Luke 4:1-13.

⁵ II Kings 2:1-18.

⁶ Acts 1:9.

⁷ Acts 2:1-13.

Thomas Troeger, a hymn writer and homiletician at Yale, points out that because Christ was taken up *while* blessing his disciples, they were able to experience the blessing as an *ongoing* reality that did not end with his departure but remained with them all their lives.

As the disciples pick up the mantle of mission in Acts, they face bitterness, resistance, persecution. Some are imprisoned. Some are shipwrecked. Some are assailed by angry mobs.

Yet the last memory they have is *blessing*, him *blessing* them, them being *blessed* by him, thus they are being able to carry on, even when carrying on is the last thing they have the confidence to do. Because the last memory they have is that of being blessed, they are able to bless God and bless others. The last memory is blessing.⁸

III.

In our lives and faith, we inherit *indirectly* the blessing the disciples received *directly*. We live with it and from it, as if it were a trust fund which paid for our education or made the down payment on our first house. Though we were not present at the ascension to receive the blessing directly, we inherit its memory and experience it through blessings we have received directly, usually through other people.

When my own father was dying, I was a freshman in college. One value of spending his final seven days by his bedside was to receive a blessing. Early in those seven days I told him I was pretty sure I was going to be a minister, and not the doctor he (like so many parents of his generation) had hoped their children would become. A few days later, when he could no longer talk and could move only one side of his body, he wrapped his still mobile arm around first my brother and then me and nodded his head, as if to approve and confirm, who we were, who we had become, who we would grow to be.

It was the last time I saw him move under his own power. I took his lifting of the arm and nodding as physical signs of blessing, blessing he was in the act of bestowing at the time of his departure, blessing that has shaped me in ways I am probably not fully able to realize. The last memory is blessing.

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One of the great Irish poets of the twentieth century is Galway Kinnell. In his poem “St. Francis and the Sow,” Kinnell is able to place himself and his reader in the heart and mind of a sow who has recently given birth and who – in the exhaustion and demands on her body of motherhood – can no longer sense that she is blessed.

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis

⁸ Thomas Troeger, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), 521. Cited by Kathy Anderson's paper in this passage for the Moveable Feast 2017.

put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.⁹

“While [Jesus] was *blessing* them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.” Not just “self-blessing,” as in the poem; but “in words and in touch,” the *blessing* of Christ. The memory of blessing.

IV.

Like many of you, I have thinking and reading a lot recently about the nation in which we live and whose fallen we recognize this weekend. Beyond the blessing we experience and remember in our lives with God, I have been thinking about the sense we have that our nation has been blessed, that we are or at least have been “one nation under God.” I have been wondering what, if anything, that blessing means in our time.

Heading into Memorial Day Weekend, David Brooks published a column entitled “The Four American Narratives.”¹⁰ He starts by saying:

America has always been a divided, sprawling country, but for most of its history it was held together by a unifying national story....an Exodus story...the story of leaving the oppressions of the Old World, venturing into a wilderness and creating a new promised land. In this story, America was the fulfillment of human history, the last best hope of earth.

Brooks then says:

That story rested upon an amazing level of national self-confidence. It was an explicitly Judeo-Christian story, built on a certain view of God’s providential plan.

We might add: “That story was built on a sense of blessing.”

But, Brooks goes on:

...that civic mythology [of blessing] no longer unifies. American confidence is in tatters and we live in a secular culture. As a result, we’re suffering through a national identity crisis. Different groups see themselves living out different national stories and often feel they are living in different nations.

⁹ Galway Kinnell, “Saint Francis and the Sow” from *Three Books*. Copyright © 2002 by Galway Kinnell. Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/42683>.

¹⁰ David Brooks, “The Four American Narratives,” *The New York Times* 5/26/17.

Citing two other writers, Brooks presents four “rival narratives” he sees in America today:

- The libertarian America
- The globalized America
- The multicultural America
- And America First.

He then offers a narrative he believes will be best for our nation. He labels it “the talented community.”

This story sees America as history’s greatest laboratory for the cultivation of human abilities. This model welcomes diversity, meritocracy, immigration and open trade for all the dynamism these things unleash. But this model also invests massively in human capital, especially the young and those who suffer from the downsides of creative destruction.

In this community, the poor boy and girl are enmeshed in care and cultivation. Everything is designed to arouse energy and propel social mobility.

Brooks concludes:

The talented community sees America as a new Athens, a creative crossroads leading an open and fundamentally harmonious world. It’s an Exodus story for an information age.

I don’t know that David Brooks has any greater handle on what America can be going forward than any others have. And I am too much a creature of the Fall not to be a bit skeptical of a vision that assumes the world can be “fundamentally harmonious.” But I share with the basically secular David Brooks a sense that there is something about the American story that has sought to live up to a sense of blessing from Providence, a sense of blessing from God.

Just as the disciples’ last memory of Christ is his *blessing* that propels them into their brave new world, perhaps the most important task lying before us as a nation is – like the sow – to recover a sense that we have been blessed by God. Kinnell says: “sometimes it is necessary//to reteach a thing its loveliness...” Even more hopeful, perhaps a rekindled sense of blessing can take us into the future not in a way that makes us arrogant or insular or self-congratulatory – not in a way that leads us to overlook our sins of past and present – both of which as a sense of blessing often does – but in a way that leads us to share with others what what has been most beautiful within us.

On this Memorial Day weekend, I dare pray that the last memory of those who have given their lives for our country was a sense of blessing on the nation they were serving, on the people they loved, on the sacrifice they made. I dare pray as well that we who live in our nation today, as soldier, as civil servant, or as citizen, have a memory of blessing, a rekindled sense of loveliness. One cannot properly receive a blessing without a desire to share it with others. “The long, perfect loveliness of the sow” is the mantle of blessing we have been given to relearn and to share.

Amen.