
Escapism and Ascension

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Easter 7, The Sunday after the Ascension - Year A**

So when they had come together, they asked Jesus, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' Jesus replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. — Acts 1:6-9

I confess. I confess. The event we observe today, across Christendom, baffles me. Forty days after the observance of Easter, the Christian Church observes Ascension Day, and today, the Sunday after Ascension Day. We note, simply, that Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of sight. That's just weird.

I did have the good fortune this past week to listen to the new book on tape, a novella, actually, by the famous musician, James Taylor. Surely we remember his smooth guitar work, with its dazzling chords and sweet harmonies, and his fluid voice. In that lovely autobiographical book, called "Break Shot," he tells of how, as the son of a scientist, he had absolutely no church connection and that his parents thought southern evangelicals were snake oil salesmen. But, his boarding school had mandatory chapel, three times a week; and he chose the Episcopal service because it was closest to his dorm.

But, he says, there he was introduced to the Protestant hymnal. He says, "That's bedrock stuff, in terms of harmony and western music. It's our common musical culture. It leads to a lot of southern gospel, both white and black. I would sing a bass harmony, a middle harmony, I would experiment with where in the song to put my voice. It taught me a lot. ... Those hymns were a musical education to me. I learned them on the guitar, and they taught me all I know."

So, back to me. I am not the son of a scientist, but I have a hard time understanding why an event such as Jesus' Ascension is in the Bible. It's simply weird that the disciples record this event: that, when Jesus appeared to them after his death, around forty days later, Jesus simply ascended from their sight.

I know that we Christians often explain this story by saying that the Ascension of Jesus makes way for the descent of the Holy Spirit—which we will observe next week, by the way, in the Feast of Pentecost. We say that as the literal, earthly, body of Jesus has ascended, so then the descent of the Holy Spirit makes us the spiritual Body of Christ; and we are empowered to go out and into the world in the same mission of Jesus. I get that.

Still, it's weird. Some of our Episcopal hymns remark on this weirdness, as we sang earlier today, "though the cloud from sight received him, when the forty days were o'er, shall our hearts forget his promise, 'I am with you evermore'" (Hymn 460).

During these last several weeks, however, I have related to another feature of this story of the Ascension. After many weeks, the constrictions of our self-quarantines, and our self-isolations, have squeezed many of us into another dimension. Almost all of us have had a similar, yearning, experience now.

It is the experience of wanting to get out of here! Get me out of here! Yeah, I've been patient and kind and longsuffering and prayerful and generous. But it's too much. I'm singing that other gospel song, "I'll fly away, oh Glory, I'll fly away. Some glad morning when this life is over, I will fly away."

Yes, I want to be like Jesus, and I want especially to be like him in the Ascension! I want to be lifted up. I want to fly myself out of this prison. The more fortunate among us have now begun to escape, to a weekend away, or a drive to the country or to the mountains or to the beach. But the rest of us are still stuck. I want to fly away.

Sadly, the stress of our entrapment has forced some of us to fly away in unhealthy ways. Many of us made jokes, early on, about how liquor stores would be open during this quarantine because they were deemed an “essential business.” Oh, yes, I have definitely been one of those enjoying those drinks!

But, I also know that unhealthy escapism has been an especially threatening feature of this quarantine. Alcohol and drugs have presented themselves as our familiar addictions again. And other addictions have tempted us with other ways to get away from it all: addiction to anger, for instance, and its power to make us believe that if we simply explode in quick anger at the situation, it will be okay.

Or, addiction to control! An addiction that so many of us share. We want to be in control! And the ability to be in control is exactly what this virus has taken from us! So, some of us have escaped by trying to seize control wherever we can seize it, like adding our own brilliant analyses and solutions to these crisis situations, or - worse- by stealing control from others, stealing control from what little the others around us have had. Seizing control is also addictive behavior. We all want to fly away! We want to escape! None of those ways is the way to escape. None of those is the way out, or the way up.

James Taylor, you may know, is a self-acknowledged recovering addict. Back to his autobiography again. His self-awareness, in my mind, provides a kind of genius for me. He talks about escape. He speaks of drugs as an attempt to escape ourselves.

Listen to what he says: “Any drug is a shortcut to the mechanism that makes a reward in your brain. We all want to escape ourselves. ... The best part of us knows we have to transcend that, if we are going to survive as a family, as a tribe, as a nation, as a species. We have to think as a collective. We have to cooperate. ... Religious faith moves us towards a collective consciousness. So does music. It allows us to give our individuated egos the slip... Music takes us outside the prison of the self, which is an ecstatic thing to have happen. I think intoxication is the same drive. For better or for worse, opiates and psychedelics also move us away from the individual prison, or at least they help us transcend our egos for a while. (Minute 58 in “Break Shot.”)

Wow. Yes, Taylor reminds us that we are, actually, supposed to be trying to escape something. We are supposed to be trying “to give our individuated egos the slip.” Healthy people are able to transcend our egos. Good music, and good religion, help us to do that. Intoxicants, however, last only a while, and then they turn on us.

So, that’s James Taylor’s gift to me, and maybe to us, in this Ascension season. Maybe the Ascension represents not simply some old objective historical event. Maybe the Ascension is about being able to give our individuated egos the slip, to rise to a place where we appreciate the collective consciousness.

This collective consciousness is what Jesus prayed for, in John 17, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” So that they may be one, as we are one.

The way towards our spiritual unity is to give up our egos, or at least our false egos, so that we can be part of something greater. I think this is what Jesus had in mind when he said things like, “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:23–24).

Thus, Jesus’s ascension is his final act of losing himself, giving himself up, escaping his individuated ego – leaving in place, and exposing, that greater good, the Holy Spirit of God, who makes us one collective body. The true Body of Christ.

Our yearnings for escape during these days of isolation are not bad. They are natural, in a way. They are real. They represent the deepest part of ourselves wanting to break up and out. Such addictions as intoxicants, or immediate gratifications, or shopping, may tempt us; but they do not transport us to a blessed transcendence. I’ll fly away.

That’s what I want to sing to my false ego. That’s what I want to sing to my false self, these days.

*Some glad morning when this life is o'er,
I'll fly away;*

*To a home on God's celestial shore,
I'll fly away.*

It's an Ascension hymn, to ourselves!

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.