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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

HE WAS TAKEN UP

By Ron Allen

Have you ever said farewell to a person you really cared about? Perhaps a person you spent many years with as a work colleague, a classmate or a boss. They may have been a sibling or your own child. The person informs you months in advance that he intends to move away to begin a new career. Your first reaction is that of denial; it isn't really true. As the gap shrinks between the initial announcement and the actual time for the departure, you experience a vague feeling of apprehension; even dread. You realize this person has come to mean much to you. You have come to respect, appreciate, admire; to love and need them.

Not uncommonly, panic takes hold. He *really* is leaving; she *really* is not going to be here. How will I cope with this absence?

The day arrives. You are in the departure lounge. Now, the moment: she disappears behind the barrier. She is gone; wait, there she is again, waving. Then, nothing, emptiness, and loneliness.



All of these emotions must have broken over Jesus' disciples when he disappeared from their sight. Yet, as they were standing there looking at the place where they had glimpsed him last, they were suddenly not alone. Two men stood with them and spoke:

"Men of Galilee," they said. "Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

The story of Jesus' ascension as told by Luke in Acts, is the only one we have with any detail. The other evangelists are content to speak of the Resurrection alone—even if by so doing, the ascension to heaven is implied.

In his gospel, Luke tells of Jesus being *taken up*, but in Acts he supplies more detail with a view to answering a question that was bound to be asked. Namely: Where is he now? Where did Jesus go? That he was not dead was not doubted. His followers had seen enough of him during forty days after the Resurrection to be satisfied about that.

First, Jesus was *taken up*. In the cosmology of the biblical

world, the universe is seen as a series of layers. There was water under the earth, earth, firmament, water above the earth, and the heavens beyond that. *Up* was the region of God. In going up, Jesus went to God.

"A cloud hid him from their sight" (Acts 1:9). In the Old Testament, when God chose to reveal himself to human beings, God enfolded his presence in a cloud. This was so in the Exodus. He was in the cloud that led Israel by day. When he came down on the Mountain, he covered himself with clouds (Exodus 16:9, 16). When Peter, James and John were given a vision of Christ glorified, Luke reports that a cloud came and enveloped them (Luke 9:24, 25). Later, the same writer describes Jesus' appearing at the last day: *"They will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21:27).* Details such as these that Luke gives are sufficient to convey the impression that when Jesus went away, he went to God.

By this it is not meant that Jesus *went to God* in the same sense as indicated by the same phrase in reporting the death of a person. A great deal more than that is meant. What other writers of the New Testament mean when they say that Jesus 'sat down at God's right hand' (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 1:13; Hebrews 8:1)—that is what is conveyed by the ascension story.

It means that *"God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).* Far from a mere relocation to an extra-terrestrial address, Jesus was taken up into God. Where is Jesus? He is at the very nerve center of the universe. He sits on the seat of government. 'He's got the whole world in his hands.' Nothing is beyond his oversight; everything is within range of his broad survey.

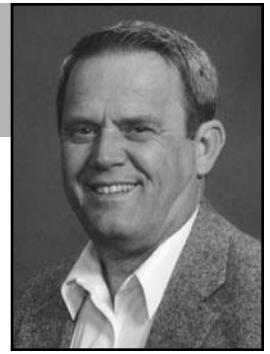
He was 'taken up' means that believers in Jesus are not left merely with a vivid set of fond memories; the recollection of a beautiful thing that used to be. Because he was taken up into the status and prerogatives of God, all that he was when he was in Galilee and Judea, is still—only more so. When by the lake he fed the crowd and showed himself Lord of man's material needs—that he remains. What he was when he stood on the sea and showed himself Lord of the storms that batter us—that he is still. What he was when he healed the deaf, blind, maimed and broken—that he is now. What he was when he refused to give up on his ignorant, ambitious, obtuse and weak disciples—he is now. The Jesus who refused to condemn the adulterous woman, who sympathetically touched lepers,

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

A friend of mine told me about his next door neighbor, an Atheist and a likable one. Each time my friend comes home from church, he hears his neighbor cheerily calling out to him from his side of the hedge: "Welcome back to the real world."

This remark reflects a widely-held opinion today, that belief in God and religious faith in general, has nothing to do with the human situation. It is at best a benign pastime for men and weak-minded women, which does no harm as long as they keep it to themselves. At worst it is a collection of ideas held only by the ignorant or the insane. Professor Geoffrey Dawkins (The God Delusion) says often that believers are 'Barking Mad.' He and others like him think that religion is dangerous, and if it could be eliminated altogether, most of the world's evil would disappear with it.

This is a point of view that has gained momentum in my lifetime. In my everyday interaction with people I sometimes hear believers called 'Sky-pilots.' I'm sure this is meant to convey the thought that God is somehow disconnected with life on this planet. The worship of God, the investigation of Scripture, the battle for religious values, all these are increasingly viewed as off-limits in public discourse. They are judged to be matters only for private interest. The result is that in movies, literature, and other art forms, more often than not the religious character—priest, pastor—is depicted as a stranger to ordinary affairs. He doesn't fit. He is somewhat irrelevant. He is more ornamental than functional.

Other professionals: doctors, lawyers, builders, soldiers, law officers, and bar-tenders, are deemed more essential to the business of life than those who speak of things invisible.

When we read about Christian origins in the book of Acts, we may well be surprised at how things have turned out in our day, because it is clear that the first generation of Christians found faith ever so relevant to the responsibilities and challenges of their lives. Following Jesus was not for them a hobby, a diversion or an exercise in escapism which might have its equivalent in today's virtual on-line universe. Acts, however, tells another story. The religion founded by Jesus was not devised by him to be an 'opiate of the people'; something to blunt life's keen edge; something with which to avoid reality. After the tragic circumstances of his death, something amazing happened. The disciples did not trudge into the rest of their lives defeated and deflated. Instead, they flung themselves into the common life of all men, to bring material relief from hardship and hope amid despair. Why? It was because they were certain that Jesus was alive and more available to them than he had ever been before. This knowledge filled them with courage. They blessed their generation, and the world of today still benefits from their faith.

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who dined with obnoxious little people like Zacchaeus, who forgave his tormentors—rules the world.

The One who was taken up, is God's beloved Son. God took him up and gave him with the highest office in the universe. He gave him a name above every other name. And now, every aspect of his life-giving personality has the scale, the extent, the immediacy, the omnipotence and omnipresence of God. "He who descended is the very One who ascended, higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe" (Ephesians 4:10).

By going upward and disappearing into a cloud, Jesus assured his disciples that he went to God. But God is not at some fixed address. God is everywhere. "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there" (Psalm 139:7, 8).

During the forty days after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples many times. They did not see him constantly

over the forty days. Two disciples were walking along a road and, suddenly, he was walking with them. When the twelve were hiding together in a room for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them, showing them his wounds. Again, at another time, he surprised them by showing up at a meal, and saying grace. Then there was the morning by the lake after the disciples had been fishing all night. Jesus was waiting for them with breakfast ready.

In this way the disciples were introduced to the idea that Jesus was always close to them even though they could not see him. When he was finally taken from view by the cloud, they had already been taught that this did not mean he was out of their lives. It meant the opposite. It meant that the Crucified One was in Godhead who is ever present at one and the same time. Though removed from their sight and touch, they knew they would never be without him. No hardship, grief, worry, injustice or calamity would ever be theirs to endure without the companionship of He who holds the keys of the grave and of death. He would never leave them nor forsake them. He would →

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be with them to the end of the world, and nothing would ever separate them from his love.

Upwards of one hundred and twenty of Jesus' followers watched him ascend. As he went up they *looked intently* into the sky. The word in use means they were craning their necks. There was passion and concentration in their gaze. The scene was loaded with poignancy.

When for many years I worked at a crematorium and lawn cemetery, I was aware of a man, a senior gentleman, who would visit his wife's grave most days. He brought his chair with him and would sit for an hour or two talking out loud to his beloved. Sometimes he would stand up and pace back and forth expostulating, gesticulating and reproaching his spouse for leaving him all alone. No one felt anything but sympathy for this old man. Not the least because his actions gave a futile dimension to his grieving. There was no relief; no resolution.

When Jesus finally left, his disciples were not in despair. Two men clad in white stood beside them and asked: "*Why do you stand here looking into the sky?*" It is difficult not to be reminded here, of Luke's reporting of Resurrection morning at Jesus' tomb. He says that two men in gleaming white stood near the open grave and asked: "*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen*" (Luke 24:5, 6). The women had come to the tomb that morning, their hearts raw with grief. Why did they come? They came to be near Jesus. So human of them to linger near the corpse of the One they loved. Yet, what they were doing was totally inappropriate in light of the fact that Jesus was not dead but alive.

Similarly there was something incoherent about the one hundred and twenty disciples staring into the sky. It was unbecoming for the women to linger cheerlessly at the tomb, so it was anomalous for the disciples to peer forlornly into the heavens.

Why? Because "*This same Jesus, who has been taken from you will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven*" (Acts 1:11). These words reinforce the message of the ascension. Jesus did not simply vanish into the ether. No, he reigns as King, High priest, Judge, Redeemer and is not now constrained in ways that he was during the days of his humiliation. Nor has he now moved on to interests differing from those that compelled him then. We—the people of the world—remain in his innermost affections. So he will come back; he *will* come back.

Therefore, the ascension story suggests that a Christian discipleship truly representative of its founder will not be an 'other-worldly' one. "He will come back means that the love wherein *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son*" still powers the universe. The momentum and intention of God's feelings for us have not faded.

This 'same' Jesus means that the Jesus who will come back is the One who suffered for us. The bond of love revealed at Calvary is not cut; it holds us still and will never let us go.

That Jesus who died for us will come back gives force to the question: "*Why are you standing looking up into the heavens?*" Religious nostalgia fails to grasp that Jesus was taken up in order to be more present with his people than he had ever been before. "*It is for your good that I go away*" (John 16:6). Gazing into the sky in the hope that Jesus will again make himself visible is not for Christians. To be endlessly curious about Jesus' exact whereabouts; the kind of place he inhabits; its architectural specifics—is not appropriate for Christians. Trying to judge with maximum accuracy just when Jesus will come into view again; seeking to compute which part of the

sky he will reappear from—these preoccupations are of the kind discouraged by the two messengers dressed in white.

No pining for the way things were when Jesus was here before he left, but compassionate orientation to the world of human beings and their needs; that is what most becomes those who faith is in Jesus. No useless fretting, but the practice of his presence. This is true witness to Jesus. Not an anxious retreat into institutionalism dedicated to the memory of the Jesus who *was*. Rather, living out the values, ways and Spirit of the Living Savior; a rehearsal of his odyssey into the human maelstrom; his shouldering of the world's burden.

That is what the first disciples did. They did not go home from the ascension to commence godliness without engagement with the contemporary world. They went into the world—Christ working with them—to claim it for him.


It was altogether the world's good fortune that Jesus was taken up. If he had not been, Christians would have become a quaint, sectarian, insignificant huddle; not the salt of the earth. Knowing that their Lord and friend now reigned in eternity, they experienced closer fellowship with him than ever. Thus fortified, they crisscrossed the ancient world by land and sea, turning it upside down.

Since marrying, I have learned something that would have eluded me apart from being love. (I am still learning!) I learned that I could derive immense pleasure out of just being with Carmen—even when not being anywhere special, not doing anything extraordinary. Even close proximity without conversation can be a delight. The longer we are together, the more this is so. I suppose the reason for this is that real intimacy between a man and a woman involves a giving and receiving of the self that goes way beyond mere physical union.

You have heard it said: "I don't know what those two see in each other." Of course you don't. No one could. Lovers have eyes to see things that remain invisible to everyone else. That is why lovers can be entranced, emotionally ravished by one another; often without having to say anything.

A lover knows that the other has access to regions of personality that are hidden to all besides. Lovers can be inspired, strengthened, encouraged and mutually counseled in their love, even when they are not physically present to each other. We know from examples in everyday life that love can transmit power from one person to another across vast distances.

If this is so in human experience, how much more possible it must be between the Son of God and his disciples. His love is always upon them. Nothing can separate them from it. Not trouble, not hardship, not starvation, oppression, poverty, war or any demonic force. Not even death can wrest a Christian away from Christ.

Peter, James, and John were thrilled to be able to hang out with Jesus when he lived in Galilee and Judea. Now, because he was taken up, that privilege belongs to us all. The weakest, poorest, most unrecognized believers the world over have immediate access to Jesus. They will never walk alone. 



THE TREES OF EDEN AND CALVARY

By Desmond Ford

For centuries commentators have delighted in comparing the trees of Eden and Calvary. Both trees are the trees of the knowledge of good and evil. At the cross we have a revelation of the goodness of God and the evil of man transcending all other disclosures. At the cross the believer finds a view pleasant to the eye of faith, and good for spiritual food, just as the tree in Eden was said to be pleasant to the sight and good for food. When the woman found the tree to be “desired to make one wise” she plucked its fruit, and when we find in the cross the wisdom of God, we partake of it. Concerning both trees we find that they are located “in the midst” (Genesis 2:9; John 19:18; cf. Revelation 1:13; 5:6; 22:2).

By this repeated phrase in connection with the trees of life and knowledge, and with the cross of Jesus, we are reminded of the centrality of Christ and his sacrifice. The Savior of Calvary stands between God and man, between the Father and the Spirit, between life and death, between time and eternity, law and grace, judgment and mercy. The Tree of Life in the midst of Paradise also symbolised his cross, since to find Christ as one’s sacrifice is to find paradise. Only if we keep him in the center of all beliefs and practices can all be well. By way of contrast we observe that God planted the first tree and man the second. Man was forbidden to partake of the Edenic tree but he is invited to eat of the second. In one case we have Satan saying in effect, “Take and eat and you will be blessed.” At the communion service which prefigured his death, Jesus bade his disciples, “Take, eat,” that they might be healed.

While a thief stealing from the first tree was expelled from Paradise, another thief, centuries later, was promised entrance into Paradise *because* he partook of the second tree.

On numerous occasions, Scripture refers to the cross as a tree. This is most appropriate since trees provide food and shelter; they are places of rest and beauty and have, in themselves, the seed of continued life. In all these ways, every good tree points to the cross of Christ.

In Genesis 18:4, the tree is pictured as a place giving rest, in contrast to the previous reference to a tree which depicted it as the place of the curse (Genesis 3:17). In the next passage referring to a tree (Exodus 15:23-25), we find it the symbol of transformation. In 2 Kings 6:1-7, a tree branch becomes the agent of resurrection and ascension. Thus to every believer the cross is rest, transformation, resurrection and ascension (Ephesians 2:1-6). Calvary has transformed the tree of knowledge of good and evil into a tree of life for all who believe.

-Desmond Ford: KALEIDOSCOPE OF DIAMONDS
Vol. 2, pp. 15, 16.



NEVER ALONE

Do you know the legend of the Cherokee Indian youth’s rite of passage? His father takes him into the forest; blindfold’s him and leaves him alone. He is required to sit on a stump the whole night and not remove the blindfold until the rays of the morning sun shine through it. He cannot cry out for help to anyone. Once he survives the night, he is a MAN.

He cannot tell other boys of this experience because each lad must come into manhood on his own. The boy is naturally terrified. He can hear all kinds of noises. Wild beasts must surely be all around him. Maybe even some human might do him harm.

The wind blows the grass and earth, shaking his stump, but he sits stoically, never removing the blindfold. It is the only way he can become a man. Finally, after a horrific night, the sun appears and he removes his blindfold.

It is then that he discovers his father sitting next to him on the stump. He has been at watch the entire night, protecting his son from harm.

Even when we don’t know it, God is watching over us, sitting with us on the stump.

-Author Unknown.



CHRIST LIVES—*The Evidence.*

There is only one proof that Christ is alive: his love is alive in the world, and it makes people do things which nothing human could... It is rare to meet the true church. What is the church? A group of adults who love one another, a group of adults different enough from one another for their reciprocal understanding, trust, and love to be a miracle. Have you ever met someone who loved in an inexplicable way? If you have, you know that Christ is alive in the world, because his love lives in the world, and that is the proof of the Resurrection of Christ.

-Louis Evely: A RELIGION FOR OUR TIME,
pp. 32, 33.

