

Hespeler, August 1, 2021 © Scott McAndless – Communion

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15, Psalm 78:23-29, Ephesians 4:1-16, John 6:24-35

If you are like most readers, when you come to this passage in the Letter to the Ephesians, you kind of scratch your head. **“When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; He gave gifts to his people.”** I mean, that part is weird enough. In the middle of a discussion about how Jesus gives gifts to the people of the church, the apostle pauses to pull out this obscure verse from Psalm 68, a psalm about how God fights against and destroys the enemies of Israel and he doesn’t even seem to have translated it correctly.

But then the passage goes from just plain weird to something that almost seems to defy reason. The writer begins to explain what he thinks the passage means: **“When it says, ‘He ascended’, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.”**

What? How does that necessarily follow? I mean, I will accept the great teaching of the philosopher Tyrone Davis who said, or rather sang, “What goes up, must come down.” But I cannot think of anyone, apart from the writer of this letter, who would declare it *obvious* that what goes up must have previously descended into the very depths of the earth, but that is what he says.

## What did they know?

So, what is going on in this passage? The only way to really make sense of it is if the people who first received this letter knew some things that we, as modern readers don’t know. The fact of the matter is that, in this passage, the writer is referring to a story that the Christians in Ephesus and, indeed, Christians in most places at that time were already familiar with. It is a story that was very popular throughout the early Christian Church but that, for some reason, never really made it into the Bible apart from a few obscure references here and there. It even got a mention in one line of the Apostles’ Creed. But it was largely forgotten by the church in the ensuing centuries.

Even if it got a mention in a creed, it was not really a doctrine, it was just a story, a story that the church told to make sense of something that troubled them. Whether they actually took the story literally or not, I’m not sure. But, however they took it, it really helped them to work through what they believed. So I think that you really should know this story, it probably went like this.

## The Gloom of the Grave

There is nothing but gloom as far as the eye can see. And that is the right word for it – gloom. You can’t really call it darkness because that would be *something* – something to notice, something to care about. Darkness is an absence of light, but this is an absence of meaning.

And in the midst of the gloom lie the souls of men and women. They had once known the pleasure of life, had felt the touch of the wind on their cheeks, the warmth of an embrace and the delight of a good laugh that starts in your belly and



shakes your whole body. But all of that is now, for them, little more than a fading memory.

## Three Souls

Here, every day is exactly the same as the last and so time has no meaning. But throughout that immeasurable passage of time, some of the souls come to huddle together, finding something like a connection in their fading memories of the life that they had known. For example, see over here where there is a huddle of three figures. They all come from different eras, but, down through the centuries, they have found some sort of kinship together. They have no names anymore, not even any real sense of identity. But they do have stories. They are stories of defiance and self-righteousness. The stories are all that they have, so they tell them over and over again until they hate the sound of each other's voices and even of their own. But there is nothing else to do.

## From the Time of Noah

One is speaking now in her raspy voice. "I remember how we used to laugh at that old fool, Noah. He used to go on and on about how the rains were coming, how that ark of his was the only way anyone could escape. But we told him, we told him that that ark was just some government conspiracy that was meant to control us and take away our freedom. We told him that the flood was just like the regular seasonal rains and it surely wouldn't affect young and strong people like us, just maybe the old and infirm. I remember saying that it was my choice if I wanted to get on an ark or not.

"And I suppose that he was technically right. When those flood waters came, there really was no escaping them. But, man, did it feel good to make fun of silly old Noah. You should have seen the look on his face when he closed that door, we really showed him!"

## From the Time of Babel

The man beside her isn't listening to a word she says. He's busy reliving the high point of his own glory days. "I was right there," he cries. "I helped to carry the final load of bricks right to the top of that tower on the plain in the land of Shinar. And we knew that when we had set those final bricks in the mortar, we would have done it. We would have reached the heavens themselves and taken our place among the gods.

"Of course, it was just at the moment that everything went wrong. I turned to the man beside me to say what was on my heart. 'This is it,' I cried, 'this the day when we take control of everything and can use it to serve ourselves.' But the man looked at me as if he hadn't understood a word that I'd said – which indeed he hadn't. Then he responded with nothing but gibberish and I knew that we were undone.

"It all fell apart after that. We could never come together, never organize anything after that. But, for one brief moment, it seemed as if anything, even heaven itself, was within our grasp. I will always have that, and I will never let go of it."

## The Rebellion of Korah

The third member of the group is, if possible, even more despondent than the others. But he is no less fixated on his particular act of rebellion. "We just felt as if Moses was a little bit too full of himself," he mutters. "Why should he be the only one who gets to decide what to do? Why should God

only speak to him? Were we not also the children of Israel? Were not men like Korah and Dathan also princes among the tribes? Why should we not be able to offer incense within the tabernacle?

“And so, yes, we stood up for what we deserved. We demanded that Moses be taken down a peg or two. I still believe it would have created a better balance. But, no, before I knew it the ground began to shake and then opened up beneath us. The next thing I know, here I am and here I remain. But I will never let go of my belief that we were in the right.”

## A Gleam in the Gloom

That is sort of just what it's like in this place. No one can quite remember anything good or kind, but each one has some grievance or some memory of failed rebellion that he or she just can't let go of. They all play them over and over in their minds until it is a kind of self-inflicted torture. But, since the only alternative they feel like they have is to give into utter meaninglessness, they cling to the self-inflicted torture. And so it is. As I said, every day is alike and absolutely nothing pierces the omnipresent gloom.

Except, what is that? Over there, in the distance? It is something that is not supposed to happen here. It is an event! And they are all so unaccustomed to even the possibility of anything happening that they all just fall silent with a total lack of understanding.

## A Figure in the Light

But even more confusing is the nature of the event. It is light, something whose very presence in this place is so unthinkable that they have forgotten the word for it. All they know is that there is something assaulting their eyes, something so bright that it burns them, burns deep into their brains. And yet, somehow they just can't stop themselves from looking towards it. And so it is that, through squinting eyes, they begin to perceive that there is something in the light, or rather that there is someone, no it is someone who *is* the light.

He is wounded. The blood drips from the places in his hands and his feet where he has been pierced. Another wound gapes in his side. And, on his head, a number of smaller wounds bleed that might have been made by sharp thorns. And yet, despite the wounds and the evident loss of blood, he does not look weak in any sense. On the contrary, he has all the strength and adrenaline of a man who is just won a hard-fought contest. The sense of power and victory that radiates from him is so powerful that they all turn to him expectantly.

## A Message is Preached

He begins to speak. He speaks of freedom and victory. He tells of how the power of death, the power that keeps all of these souls in prison in this gloomy place, has been defeated. That power thought that it had taken him as well but it was wrong and he has come here to proclaim that the power of death has been broken forever and ever.

“And so, my sisters and brothers, my friends from all through the eons of time,” he continues, “you are free! There is nothing that needs bind you here now. In fact, the only thing that did bind you here were the grievances and the acts of rebellion that you have held on to, clinging to them because you have nothing else.

“But today something has happened that means you no longer have to cling to them. The love of God has been demonstrated like it has never been demonstrated before. It is a love that has brought

God into the suffering of humanity in this world. And because such love is able to overcome any barrier, you can all let go. Nothing need hold you in this dreadful place anymore.”

## The Procession of the Captives

And with that, the souls of the dead began to stir. They suddenly find that the chains of regret and fear, of remorse and failure, of grievance and rebellion are like nothing. They shake them off and they embrace a love that is so fierce and so pure that it makes them feel like young people dealing with their first brush of passion. They stand up, all of them, a mighty host. And the victorious conqueror, knowing that they are with him, turns and leads them all as they form up, rank upon rank, in the shape of a cross.

And as they emerge from the depths of the earth, a great cry echoes from the heavens: “Have you done it? Have you preached to those that sleep?” And from the throngs of souls, thousands upon thousands, who form that great cross comes the answer, a mighty “Yes!”

## The Story the Church Told

Now, I will admit that I may have put some of my own dramatic flourishes on it, but that is the story that was told in the early church. It was the story of how, following his crucifixion and prior to his resurrection, Jesus descended into the realm of the dead to preach to those of all previous generations. We know that they told the story because, even if we don’t have the full text of it, we can find references to it in that passage I read from Ephesians. It is also mentioned in the First Letter of Peter which says that Jesus **“went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah.”** But that is it, those are the only references that made it into the Bible.

But it is also a story we can find references to elsewhere. There’s a line in the Apostles’ Creed, perhaps the oldest creed of the church, which only really makes sense if you know this story – the line between Jesus’ death and resurrection where it says that, *“He descended into hell.”* Finally, there is also a gospel, known as the Gospel of Peter (though nobody thinks that it was actually written by Simon Peter) that does include that rather dramatic final scene that I just ended with when the triumphant Christ emerges from the grave followed by a cross that speaks and answers the heavenly question, “Have you preached to those that sleep?”

## Why did they Tell this Story?

So the story was known and it was popular, even if it was subsequently forgotten and mostly left out of the Bible. But I guess the question is, why did they tell the story like that? Again, I’m not sure that they took it as literal truth. But I do think that they told the story to help them grab hold of what they saw as an essential truth about Jesus. They knew what they had experienced in Jesus. It was love – love so powerful that it could transcend even the bounds of time. Because of that, they believed that the event of Jesus’ death was an eternal event that could have an effect on all people in all times.

But that kind of concept of timelessness is pretty hard to grasp, and so people need to tell stories to make sense of it. And so, I believe, they told this particular story in order to understand how the love shown through the crucifixion of Jesus could be so powerful that it could overcome the resentment, rebellion and regrets even of those who had lived in ancient times.