

The Disciples Returned to Their Homes

Timothy L. Carson John 20:1-18 April 16, 2017

My nephew called me up last week with a question. He said, “So Uncle Tim, when Jesus was on the cross and flanked by the two criminals, he said something to the one repentant thief: “I say to you today you shall be with me in paradise.” What I wonder, Uncle Tim, is what the difference the location of the comma makes. If the comma is before the word “today” it has one meaning but if it is after another: “I say to you today, you shall be in paradise” (I’m telling you this thing today) or “I say to you, today you shall be in paradise.” (This is happening right now)

So the first thing I had to tell him was that there are no commas in the Greek text. In fact our entire grammar is different so you can only translate it in the whole context of the story. That’s why you get so many different English translations of the same Greek text.

After delivering this sad news to my nephew I asked him, “If you were hanging on crosses and about to meet your imminent death, to you think the weight of what he says is going to be on *when he is saying it* – right now – or *when you will join me in paradise* – right now? He answered, “Be with me in paradise right now.” And I said, “That’s why most scholars have translated it into English that way.

And that launched us into another question, about whether you merge into the glory of God at the moment of death or after a while – like you find in some New Testament passages, at the culmination of history, when the carpets are rolled up and the lights are turned off. And I had to tell my Nephew who wanted some kind of concrete answer, “You can find it both ways in the New Testament; an expectation of general resurrection at the close of the age and also at the moment of death.

“So which is it, Uncle Tim?”

“Which do you think it is?” I asked.

“Well, it makes more sense to me immediately.”

“Then immediately it is,” I told him.

But then I asked him to think about something else. Whether “today you will be with me in paradise” means this moment or at the end of history, those kinds of questions preoccupy us time-bound humans. From the vantage point of eternity it’s all the same, today or a million years from now. It’s all the same thing, really, the present part and parcel of infinity.

“Maybe this isn’t either-or,” I told him.

“How can it be both?” he asked.

“Why not?”

And so it went. I’m sure we left that conversation with more questions than answers. And I’m sure he’ll be calling again with another question.

He did set me up for today, because any thinking Christian is wondering: Once Jesus died, the moment he breathed his last, wasn’t he with God entirely in the moment? Or was there three days in the tomb, an interval of waiting? Why?

Was all that just for our benefit, the empty tomb and resurrection appearances so finite creatures like us could get it?

Mary Magdalene makes her way to the garden tomb in the pre-dawn dark, heading almost instinctively to the tomb where he has been laid. What she unexpectedly finds is absence instead of presence, empty space as opposed to body. Is that for God’s benefit or Jesus’ benefit? Or is that for Mary’s benefit, for the benefit of every person who loved him?

If they already knew that finitude lives within infinity, that limits are swallowed by eternity, would they need God’s drama of an empty tomb? Probably not. But they didn’t know so they were shown the absence to compensate for what they couldn’t know or believe.

I find it interesting that when Mary runs furiously to give the news to the other disciples, after she tells them there is a foot race to the tomb.

It's like, "Who can know this for himself first?" Mary has already seen and will see more. The beloved disciple we presume is a young John the apostle peeks in first and then Peter second. This is no accident of the text, who is seeing first, and this Gospel is making it clear that some people are walking by faith sooner than others ... Mary first, then John and finally Peter. It's interesting this is the reverse order from the usual Peter-centric tradition. And it says something about who actually comprised the inner circle among the Jesus people.

Though they have yet to encounter the Risen Jesus in appearances that doesn't mean he isn't already one with God; it's just that they don't know it yet. In the same way, just because we haven't seen some evidence or sign about the sacred, holy, mysterious nature of the universe doesn't mean it isn't there.

Either the mystery of life is there or not, and a miracle doesn't make it one way or the other. A miracle is simply something that reveals what has been invisible to us.

Our seeing or not seeing it doesn't make it there or not. We just haven't discovered it yet.

Like Mary, for instance. She is the first one to know in her guts that the spirit of Christ is eternal and never dies. Others will follow, however tardy. But our timing – the time we take to discover or know something - is no kind of constraint on God's timing, which is always eternity pushing on right now.

You see, it doesn't matter where the comma is, before or after "today." *Today, I tell you* or *Today you are*, it's all the same under the aspect of eternity.

Christ lives before Jesus was born or in every healing he conducted, when he drew his last breath or when people finally become aware of it. It's all the same thing, many moments for us, eternity for God.

I suppose it is that awareness that led St. Francis of Assisi to reply to the question, "What would you do if you knew this was the last day of your life?"

He got up from where he was gardening, stretched and said, “It’s always the first and last day of my life. What would I do? I would finish weeding this row of tomatoes.”

There is a perplexing end to this part of the resurrection story. Of course there is much more to come, but at this moment, the interval between seeing an empty tomb and knowing anything about why, they just go home. That’s what it says, “The disciples returned to their homes.” (20:10)

What would you have done? In fact, what do we do following some momentous event, terrible, beautiful or confounding? What if it is something you can’t fight, can’t change, can’t do anything about?

Through my life I have seen many people take flight and attempt to run from whatever it was that disrupted them. That flight can be a geographic trek or simply a checking out of the mind, going far, far away. I know where my father went after my mother’s death. He fled to his work.

And I’ve also seen what the disciples did after the gruesome execution of their leader and then the unexplainable and baffling conclusion of it all. What they did was crawl back into their caves. That is, they went home. People do that a lot when it’s too much. They isolate themselves, find a safe place, crawl into a closet, disappear into the fog of drugs or some addiction, or build a cabin in the woods. It’s how human beings and other animals protect themselves in times of confusion, threat and injury. And if you don’t think these disciples were injured you haven’t been following the story. They are Lieutenant Dan in *Forrest Gump*.

Now they are cocooning, waiting to be born, and they are also waiting on hope. When you are down that far, when you feel that disappointed or betrayed or abandoned, you never hope unnecessarily because that hope can so easily be disappointed. You are cautious. So even though they just looked at an empty grave they haven’t moved beyond the level of the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Where have they taken him?).

But to trust, believe, accept and leave the house again will require much, much more for these followers of a crucified Messiah.

And this leads me back to my nephew's indirect question: now or later? Was Jesus talking about paradise now or later? And to the point, if it is now, right now, in an instant like the apostle Paul put it one place – "we shall be changed in an instant" – then Jesus is already one with God in the purest sense.

So who are resurrection appearances for, anyway? Not for God because God is God is God. Not for Jesus who was the embodiment of God, he is already one with God. All that has happened already is. The past is the present is the future, done.

Who is this for? It's for the sake of the disciples, the human creatures stuck in time, the human creatures who can barely see who they are in a mirror, much less imagine an infinite universe. This is for human creatures who sense it's not all over but don't have enough sense to get out of their fetal positions.

It's going to take a lot more to get them out of their man and woman caves. They are the ones who need a new birth of hope. And that's what happens to them, individually and collectively. They have moments when they suddenly become aware of eternity bearing down on their wooden hearts and awake from their groggy trance.

Maybe it comes to you in a dream. Maybe you have a flash of insight in which you know that everything is one. Maybe you hear a voice or see the image of the loved one in your mind. Maybe you light a candle for that one and the walls of Jericho come tumbling down. Maybe a feeling comes over you that this has been forever and will always be so. Maybe like Mary Magdalene you run into an apparition of Jesus in the pre-dawn darkness and could swear it was him. Maybe, like one of the disciples, you woke up by touching the wound that made it real. All of these things.

Or maybe it's like a man I know who is now facing his final days.

He told a story about being in the Army stationed in Korea. And as he sat there, far from home, not knowing what would come next, he said that he looked out across the hills that were there before any army or any human creature existed, and Psalm 121 came to his mind:

“I lift up mine eyes unto the hills. From whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth ...”

Eternity in a moment, eternity that transforms all moments. Holy disruptions wake us up to that: the end of a life, the unexpected ending, the encounter with beauty, presence and mystery in the center of it all.

It makes you want to come out of your tomb and embrace the light. Maybe it's the light that called us out in the first place.