

Forty Days Later on a Thursday

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Ascension Day blew past this year, and I didn't take notice. But I felt something lock into place last week, as if spring finally got its act together. The gardens on my street exploded in color, and the trees tentatively began to leaf all around the city. It had been a long winter, but by Thursday of last week, spring had finally taken off.

Forty days after Easter on a Thursday, the Anglican Church commemorates the day Jesus sprung into the heavens, leaving his earthbound followers dumbfounded and grounded, full of unanswered questions and half-formed hopes.

"Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" the disciples asked Jesus (Acts 1:6). But the question hung suspended, burning in the air, as Jesus responded, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority." *Wait and see. The kingdom will come when it comes; the seasons will change when they change.*

I've heard Christians talk again and again about how the first century Israelites blew it, and how the priests and teachers of the law were malicious bad guys. The Son of God was right under their nose, but all they did was sneeze him out of Jerusalem like spring pollen.

But I think it's more complicated than that. The Hebrew scriptures gave them legitimate reasons to expect that the Messiah to come would literally usher back in the golden age monarchy of the Davidic kingdom, ending Israel's exile from their homeland and from their God forever. Israel would finally escape the bonds placed upon them by the foreigners holding them in political captivity and be their own people. So let's give first century Judaism a break. If Israel's God is who he says he is, Israel was right to expect a grand return from exile and a re-gathering of its scattered people.

But that's not what happened. Instead, Jesus jumped ship right when Israel needed a strong political revolutionary most, leaving his followers scratching their heads, wondering what to do next. So what about the great deliverance? What about Israel's return from exile? What about the reestablishment of the kingdom? What about the promises of Israel's God?

I can imagine the disciples, and us with them on Thursday forty days after Easter, staring slack-jawed on Ascension Day as the one upon whom they placed all their hopes and dreams floated away like a helium balloon, leaving them with nothing but a tremendous sense of loss and the feeling of being stranded in a place that was just beginning to feel like home.

Throughout the history of Western culture and philosophy, we seem to have never fully recovered from the loss of our balloon. Keeping company with Plato, philosophy has looked up and beyond, trying to peel back the superficial layers of reality and peer inside to find its true shape. When the disciples stood stuck staring up, philosophy followed their gaze, searching for the realm where the true forms of reality reside. Both look upward, wishing they weren't so

earthbound, and ache for a world that is more than just a dirty mirror like this one.

The past century or two is filled with thinkers from all over the world struggling to push past this intellectual inheritance that points to the hidden reality beyond, just out of reach, and they urge us to forget about our helium balloon and take a look around. Maybe, just maybe, we can say meaningful things about our world here and now without appealing to the great beyond, what's *really* out there, the truth hidden inside reality. The philosophers catch us lost in longing for a ghostly plane that most properly exists and for a language to speak that captures the truest truth, and they ask the same that the men robed white asked Jesus' followers: "Why do you stand looking up?"

This, it seems to me, the default tendency for many of us Christians, as it was for the disciples and for the philosophers of the past. We have this idea that the ascension of Jesus somehow translated everything that matters into spiritual, intangible reality, always occluded from view. The best world is the next one; the most valuable things are the ones we can't see, hear, taste, or touch.

But each time I read the Ascension Day speech of Jesus according to Matthew, I hear spring, rebirth, the revitalization of what is now. I hear echoes of the words of King Cyrus, the Persian king who called Israel back from their exile in Babylon, under the God of Israel's authority inviting the people into restoration (Ezra 1:2-4). Likewise, Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). *Now go and gather the exiles, the lost and confused, brokenhearted and hurting, throughout all the world.*

So here's the punch line. I think it's a mistake to read the New Testament as something "new," something more spiritual than what came before, something that points us upward and pulls us out of this world. On the contrary, it pushes us deeper into the world, calling us to discover the strangers and invite them in; we are in the business, as Jesus was, of gathering the exiles to form a unity centered around the Messiah who ascends, not into the ghostly ether where we should wish we could be, but to the center of what is here and now. As Martin Heidegger might say, we are not just floating ghosts who happen to be located in a body and a world; we are always already in the world, constituted by it, and inescapably connected to it.

My hope for faith and for philosophy is that each can fasten its gaze firmly to what matters most. If we can tear our eyes away from the tragedy of our faded helium balloon and take a look at what is right under our noses and before our eyes, we might just be struck slack-jawed again by what we find in the stranger, the neighbor, the friend. In the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: "for Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / to the Father through the features of men's faces" (from "As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame").

Ascension Day blows by, and when we finally slow to catch our breath and take notice, we find that life in all its richness has sprung up and taken off, breathing freshness into the most regular things at the most ordinary times. Maybe the ascended Christ hasn't abandoned us after all.