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YES!..and...

Acts 1:1-14

INTRODUCTION:

Today's scripture text is from the book that follows the Gospels called the Acts of the Apostles. After completing his Gospel, Luke went on to document how a few dozen marginalized wanderers and enemies of the State were transformed into Jesus Apostles. From the same upper room where they ate the Last Supper with Jesus, this rag-tag band of former disciples and witnesses of his death and resurrection begin a new religious movement that dramatically changes the entire world and our understanding of God's activity in it. The Book of Acts reveals to us how **everyone** can become a co-conspirator with the triune God in bridging the gap between the temporal and eternal realities.

Today we will read from chapter one and next week we'll pick up in chapter two which retells the dramatic story of that historic Pentecost when God's Holy Spirit poured out like wind and fire. But first, Luke begins by explaining the equally astounding follow up story to the resurrection of Jesus. It is commonly known as The Ascension of Christ. It is a critical pivot point from the fully human Jesus of Nazareth to the cosmic Spirit we know as Christ. His physical departure prepares the way for the pouring out, and indwelling of God's promised Holy Spirit on all humanity.

Hear the story as told by Luke from The Book of Acts 1:1-14

I wrote the former account, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after he had given orders by the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. To the same apostles also, after his suffering, he presented himself alive with many convincing proofs. He was seen by them over a forty-day period and spoke about matters concerning the kingdom of God. While he was with them, he declared, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait there for what my Father promised, which you heard about from me. For John baptized in water, but you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had gathered together, they began to ask him, “Lord, is this the time when you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He told them, “You are not permitted 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, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth.”

After he had said this, while they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud hid him from their sight. As they were still staring into the sky while he was going, suddenly two men in white clothing stood near them and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven.”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mountain called the Mount of Olives (which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away). When they had entered Jerusalem, they went to the upstairs room where they were staying. Peter and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James were there. All these continued together in prayer with one mind, together with the women, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

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Okay, I have to say right off the top that I do not blame you if you think this first chapter of Acts reads like a Marvel comic meets a David Lynch film. The story depicts Jesus floating up and away, departing into the clouds and presumably beyond, like the final act of David Copperfield’s latest Broadway show. But, if you’ll stick with me this morning, you just might discover with me how this seemingly showboat exhibitionism may very well be the most pivotal moment in the entire Bible!

First, let us pray...

*God of mystery and Spirit, we come before you with questioning minds and curious hearts this morning. Help us to understand. Draw us into your eternal truth so that we might grow in the wisdom of your spiritual realm and experience the vast freedom of choosing yes...and... Amen.*

Have you ever noticed how, nearly every Easter season, TV networks and many magazines cover stories about the “real” life and times of Jesus? CNN released that series we based our small groups on a year ago called, *Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact or Forgery*. The Smithsonian magazine also published a piece on recent anthropological

findings that gave insight into the times and customs that were common during the era of Jesus. Then a few years ago there was that book many of us read called, *Zealot* by Reza Aslan. He used the most up to date “historical critical” methods to separate the human Jesus of Nazareth from, what he considered, the mythological Christ. It’s all very interesting material. Historical criticism is an excellent way to understand scripture more fully and zero in on contextual meaning. But I think, to rely exclusively on the study of the historical Jesus risks missing a bigger, more significant narrative. Do you think it’s possible that the Gospel story can be viewed, both as a historic event set firmly in time and space and also stand as a window into the mystical, cosmic and eternal? What might happen to our understanding of the Divine if we dare to encounter the phenomenal events in scripture, such as today’s account of the ascension, as being entirely possible and critically relevant in the eternal realm of God?

Personally, I think that if the supernatural divinity of Christ is somehow diminished, redacted or ignored, the entire biblical narrative falls completely apart. I’m not saying it’s wrong to doubt, question or critique. That’s what Bible study is. What I *am* saying is that when we hold tightly to firm ideas about how God does or does not manifest in the world, the scripture will quickly separate into two distinct camps and lose most of its transformative power. In one camp we put the earthly, historically probable and often verifiable events and characters; you have your Moses and Pharaoh, 12 Tribes of Israel, Kings are crowned; temples are built and wars fought. Not much to argue about here. Way over in the other camp we put all of these mystical, unexplainable, phenomenal events such as parting seas, burning bushes, virgin births, and angelic interventions. We can easily segregate the material world from the spiritual mystery like we sort dirty laundry. We become easily satisfied with abstract, intellectual ideas about the Divine based on what we can or can’t accept in scripture. We think in unimaginative dichotomies. Either it is earthbound or heavenly - moralistic metaphor or super hero mythology. The result is that we fashion for ourselves a pathetically meager and weak god, a small toothless deity that is made into our likeness rather than the other way around.

So, for a moment, imagine with me the possibilities that emerge if we can unify this divide between the physical and the spiritual. Instead of either/or, can you conceive of both/and? Instead of “no, not possible” let’s boldly explore ‘yes and also’. What might happen if we approach these scriptural stories in a non-dualistic way and engage the richness of both the historical critical realism and also allow for the possibility that this omnipotent mysterious God is actually drawing all creation into a larger invisible reality? What might it mean to say yes to all of it? Perhaps we might discover that this ordinary perceptible world is actually the living, organic gateway

that leads us into the infinite mystical realm where we can live every moment in harmony with the very source of all joy, wholeness and beauty. Imagine!

Suddenly, this wild story of God in flesh appearing leads us a God who loves, suffers, feels pain and knows the cold emptiness of death. As the story unfolds, we stand with Mary at the empty tomb and experience the ecstasy of seeing the resurrected Christ. When we read the first chapter of Acts, we are there with the Apostles as Jesus ascends. When I yield to the possibility of yes, I don't see Jesus floating up in the clouds as shown in a 16<sup>th</sup> century painting. I see the risen Christ returning effortlessly into pure Spirit. Visually, for me it's like the Star Trek transporter room.

When I allow the scripture to be both physical and spiritual I am able to perceive a new reality, a reality where the mysterious, unfathomable, seemingly distant God, beyond all space and time, is actually self-disclosing an astounding truth. When I venture to say yes to paradox and mystery, the story of Jesus life, death and resurrection becomes the meta-narrative that provides a cosmic pattern embroidered into the fabric of existence and lends structure to a profound truth. I can see in the Christ event a universal, infinitely circular narrative that demonstrates God's pervasive activity, both in our time and space as well as the eternal always. When I dare to say yes to the incarnate, human Jesus of Nazareth *and* yes, to the ascended Christ I discover the amazing unification of this physical/material world with the invisible spiritual dimension. Could it be that God's intent with the entire Jesus project is to dramatically point to the awesome reality that heaven and earth are not two segregated realities but actually in fact one and the same? If so, then the life, death and resurrection of Jesus stands as the ultimate, universal demonstration of how this temporal biological, flesh and blood, human entity is a sacred and precious container for an indestructible, pure and utterly perfect Spirit. Maybe this is what's happening as the apostles witness Christ ascending back to Spirit. They too have this sudden epiphany witnessing the unification and are stunned into silence. Yes...and...then...

Two men dressed in white appear next to them to say that not only has Christ died and risen but also will come again! Next week, in fact, we will read in chapter 2 how God did manifest again to these Apostles as Spirit, and we learn that Jesus may have disappeared like Captain Kirk, but the Cosmic Christ did not go anywhere. The Cosmic Christ is now the enlightened Spirit that dwells in everyone.

The union of the material and Spiritual worlds is dramatically played out right here in the ascension story. It becomes the pivot point that startles every believer into the realization that we as human beings, as individuals, as a church are actually the ongoing incarnation of Jesus. This is what it means when Paul refers to followers of Jesus as the Body of Christ. This what Saint Teresa of Avila meant when she wrote,

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,

This indwelling Spirit is, in fact, what animates all matter in the universe, and we are invited to actually participate in this eternal dance! This Christian life is all about participation more than any religious doctrine or orthodoxy. The good news of the Gospel is centered in this startling truth that we are both physical beings and eternal Spirit inextricably woven together. Yes...and, is an invitation to wholeness, joy and infinite wonder. All we need do is accept the gift.