

Easter 7, Year A
Luke 24:44-53
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There are better or least more durable topics arising from today's lessons than the one I have chosen. But I chose it because Christianity is, whether we like it or not, in an era of transition, has been for some time, and will be for some time to come. That era is painful for some, exciting for others, and for most of us, as for me, it is more than a bit of both. So I chose to speak on the issue of how we even read this passage from Luke, or for that matter the one from Acts, since they are closely related. The reason I chose this topic is because the way we read this passage will *affect* how we understand our own faith, and it will *reflect* our relationship with our own society and world view.

Some Christians either gladly or reluctantly will read this passage as history. The primary interpretive principle they will bring to it is that it all really happened exactly as written, and therefore we must believe that Jesus led the disciples to Bethany, and as he was blessing them floated off the ground and up into heaven. The first question of faith, therefore, is whether or not you can believe that actually happened. If you can and do, then you have at least some faith. If you can't and don't, then you don't have faith, or let me be less rigid here, your faith is shaky. Let me add that I think it at least plausible, that this is how Luke looked at the matter. He had the story of the assumption of Elijah,

who was carried off into heaven in the presence of Elisha, and therefore had a model from which to work, a model that all of his Jewish Christian readers would have known, and perhaps many of his gentile audience as well. There was, in other words, a powerful literary precedent for this story, and though we do not know Luke's attitude toward that text, whether he believed it was history or not, we know from his adaptation of that model that it was very important to him, and he may well have thought it historical.

But those among us who read the passage this way are immediately put into an uncomfortable position that Luke himself could not possibly have understood. Luke's universe was both static and three tiered. Situated physically below earth was hell, or the underworld, and situated physically above earth was heaven. It made perfect sense that both Elijah and Jesus would have floated off the surface of the earth on their way to heaven. Today we live in a completely different universe than that. It is not static at all, but expanding at nearly the speed of light, as it has been for around fourteen billion years. Hell is not physically below us, nor is heaven physically above. Indeed, there is no up or down any more, but only out and in, away from and towards. Jesus can float on the Oort cloud for as long as he wants, and he still won't reach heaven. Beyond this, people don't float on the air, at least not without significant help from aviation experts.

Thus, to read this passage literally is immediately to put one self in a position that Luke never occupied. Where Luke wrote a story that emerged from

his own world view and was completely consistent with it, a modern Christian, reading this story quite possibly as Luke read it, is instantly put into conflict with the prevailing world view, and must in fact either reject or set aside certain aspects of it, again, something Luke never had to do. So, to reemphasize the point, in this method of interpretation part of the test of faith requires us to determine how far we can go in that task of setting aside or even rejecting our own world view for the sake of reading this text as literal history.

The result of this is that faith is set over against science; they become viewed as antagonists, and one or the other must win. It should come as no surprise to any of us – though it may be profoundly disappointing and even disheartening – that the truth is many people, if they are convinced that in order to be a Christian they must come into conflict with their own world view, then sooner or later, in one way or another, painfully or not, they will chose their world view not because they want to, and not at all because they are bad immoral people whose souls are lost, but because they have to, they can't not chose it, for it is the way they look at "life, the universe, and everything." We see this happening all over Europe, and more recently it has begun in the United States as well.

What we must note is that it does not have to be that way. For even if we do not read this passage exactly as Luke read or wrote it, we can nevertheless do exactly what he did. We can understand it in a manner that is consistent with our world view, rather than in a manner that puts us into conflict with that very

world view. Just as Luke wrote a story that fit in perfectly with his understanding of his universe, so too can we read it in a manner that fits in perfectly with our understanding of our universe. This requires us to do no more than to look beyond the literal text of the story itself and to ask the question of why? What is Luke conveying here by telling this story? Fortunately he gives us the answer. Jesus' leaving creates the space and paves the way for God to send the infant church "power from on high." The physical departure of Jesus makes possible the spiritual presence of God. Since Jesus is now at "the right hand of God" that means nothing less than the spiritual presence of the risen Christ – who is in and of God - with the church forever more.

What we see in this passage therefore is that this is how Luke dramatizes in narrative form the argument Paul made a generation before, that the church is the Body of Christ. Therefore the test of faith in this method of interpreting the text is not can you arrange to believe something that goes completely counter to your world view, but rather do you believe that God is present in the church, shaping, forming, guiding each of us as we seek our way together in community?

In this way, we can also then appreciate that Luke has not just repeated an incident he believes happened, but more than that he has done something brilliant. For he has taken a literary type from his own tradition – the ascension story – and used it in a new, I dare say unique, way. He has used it to express the fundamental relationship between God, the risen Christ, the Church and her

members. That is the point Luke is making, and we run the risk of losing that point, and certainly failing to understand the genius of this writer, if we are engaged in a ceaseless struggle with our own world view as we wrestle with this text.

The question of whether or not the risen Christ is present in the church is itself formidable, and some Christians answer “No” to that question – and so go out and start new ones - even as I and all of us here answer “Yes.” But at least when we work in this way we are dealing with the issue Luke dealt with, grappling with the question Luke answered, and doing it in the way Luke did it, in a manner that is consistent with our world view. We can deal with this issue this way through this text whether or not the universe is six thousand or fourteen billion years old. We can deal with it whether or not the universe is a three tiered completely static stack or an unimaginably dynamic ever expanding space understood as finite but unbounded, whatever that means. We can deal with it in a Ptolemaic universe, a Copernican universe, a Newtonian universe, an Einsteinian universe or even some sort of post modern quantum whatchamacallit universe. None of that matters because when we engage the text at the level of what Luke was seeking to express, rather than the level of “did it happen or not?” we can engage these matters of faith completely within whatever world view happens to dominate at the moment in time we are so engaged.

That is why I engage this and every text of scripture, from the perspective of culture, context and intended meaning, and not from the perspective of

whether it happened or not. I do this not because I don't think any of scripture is historical, I am convinced as a matter of fact that some of it is. I do it this way because in the end though I am in constant conflict with *this world*, with its violence, its greed, its lack of compassion, conflicts as a matter of fact that every one of us experience, I can't in the end go against *my world view*, and so must read my scripture, and understand my own faith in God and in Christ, in a manner consistent with that world view. Though many good and faithful Christians cannot agree with me in this, my conviction is that if in this era of great transition we forbear to judge, and treat those who differ from us with the same kind of love and compassion that God has shown to us all in Christ, then we will come through it with a vigorous church and a faith fit for a new time. If we cannot do that, well, then we don't deserve that outcome, and God will not vouchsafe it to us.