



The New England Church Pulpit

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EMBRACING AN AGNOSTIC FAITH

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Acts 1.6-14

When the disciples had come together, they asked Jesus, "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that God 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, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward the heavens, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking toward the heavens? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

It is a curious and strange thing--this story of Jesus being whisked up into the clouds before the eyes of the disciples. I've often wondered what posture Jesus assumed in the process: did he flap his arms? Did his white, flowing robe flutter in the breeze? Did God say, "Keep your arms stiff while I lift you by the fists," like fathers do with their sons in play? Was he propelled from the earth like a rocket catapulted into space? It doesn't matter, of course. We may not even believe that it happened at all. Faith is not measured by such beliefs.

By all appearances it is another Easter, a resurrection from an earthly form to something extraordinarily different. There are two men in white garments standing here, as there were in the accounts of the resurrection, asking the same question: why do you stand there gazing into heaven when you have work on earth to do? Gawking at this extraordinary event, debating how he went up, arguing about its meaning only sidetracks from the mantle of obligation he laid upon those who remained to be agents of the love he demonstrated by his life.

The debate about the "hows" and "whys" of Jesus is rather like the age-old debate about the tree falling in the forest: If no one is around to hear it, does it still make a noise? It's a rather empty debate. The question from the men in white is the crux of the story: why do we spend our time looking for God in heaven; debating God's qualities; defending God's ways when you should be involved in doing things that serve God here on earth. Too much time and energy is spent on such navel gazing, as it were. Jesus told his disciples that they would receive power; not answers, power, not solutions; power to live by faith; power to give beyond your ordinary ability to give; power to keep going even when you can't believe. Faith isn't based on correct belief and I'm suspicious of claims that it is.

Who among us can pretend to know the ways and means of God? Is it not blasphemous to say that we do? It seems to me that Christians should embrace a more humble, agnostic approach to faith. The term “agnostic” was coined by Thomas Henry Huxley, an English biologist, in 1869 to describe not a creed but a method of skeptical, evidence-based inquiry. Huxley’s wanted a tail like all the other foxes, he said. There were labels of the theists, the deists, the atheists. He wanted an “ism” as it were so took the word for knowledge from the Greek, “*gnosis*”, and by putting the “a” in front of it coined “a-gnosis” “agnosticism” meaning “not knowing.” It is not a statement about disbelief in God but a statement of fact that says “I don’t know” when it comes to the ways and plans or the mind of God.

Rigid certainty about the attributes of God often leads us into a dead-end street. To speak of God being all-powerful, for example, in relationship to the Holocaust or Newtown or to the three women imprisoned in a home for a decade is to rush in as fools where angels fear to tread. More about this two weeks from today when I will address the problem of suffering. Suffice it to say now that it is best to stay out of the business of explaining God’s ways and stick to doing what we can to help those victimized by evil.

Gazing up into heaven, eyes riveted on this other-worldly event is not the purpose of the one who is taken up. He desires followers who will emulate his love of those in the margins, taking up the battle against those who suffer even if we don’t know the whys or what for. Rather than wasting our time debating the things about God we can’t fathom anyway, why not give ourselves to doing what we know God wants us to do: feed the hungry; provide better clothes for those whose wardrobe is inadequate against the elements; slug it out with the sick even when we can’t cure their disease; empathize with the prostitute who may not want to be doing her job any more than we want her doing it; stand up for justice against the systems that give more money to the rich at the expense of the working poor. This makes sense because it is what Jesus demonstrated with his own life as the way to follow God regardless of what we may debate about God’s nature.

The great scientist Sir Isaac Newton said:

I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble, or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay, all undiscovered before me.

Newton, one of the greatest scientists of all time, stood in awe of the truth of creation, describing his great insights and myriad accomplishments in science that have influenced thinking for 300 years as merely finding a smoother stone or a prettier shell at the edge of the vast ocean of truth. This is the humility of an agnostic approach, realizing that the great mystery beyond our infinitesimal knowledge of God is the equivalent of collecting stones at the edge of an ocean we can’t begin to fathom.

I challenge anyone who claims to know the mind and the ways of God to explain it to my friends whose only granddaughter was killed tragically at the age of two years old. If you know who God is, tell the athletes from Boston who will never run again because of a senseless act of terrorism. If you know who God is, tell those parents in Newtown; tell those three women who were held hostage and raped repeatedly for a decade who God is. I’m sure, whether believers or not, they prayed to be found. And it took God ten years? If you know who God is, tell me; I’d like to know. But I don’t believe it can be done. All we can do is stand in the mystery and hold one another’s hand through the unknown.

Job struggled with God's absence. Having lost his family, his wealth, his health, being totally alone and in agonizing pain, he railed out against God, taking the Almighty to task for hiding in the clouds, for not making himself known. Did God respond? Yes, but in an odd way. "What right do you have to complain, Job? Where were you when I formed the world, Job? Did you have a part in it? Do you understand the tornado or the sun or the wind or stars? Job learned not to presume to know the vast divine ocean that is God by the handful of shells that washed up on shore by its waves.

Like Job, all we're left with is our struggle. That's an agnostic, humble, realistic approach. And perhaps that is enough. Struggle is the foundation of faith. It is the journey of doubt and question more than certainty. It is the frustration of not knowing that keeps us questing for hope and comforting those who are lost in the sea of unknowing. Remember the gospel story about the woman who lost the coin and turned the house upside down in search of it? Remember the story of the father who had two sons who waited patiently for the prodigal to return? Christianity is a faith; it is not knowledge. It is a movement, not an establishment. It is a journey, not an arrival. It is about searching more than finding. It is agnostic more than it is certainty. As our scripture passage reminds us: it is not ours to know; it is ours to act.

A true story is told by a mother, who with children and husband, sat in a fast food restaurant after a long, difficult day. She offered her usual and customary prayer before the meal: "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest; and let these gifts to us be blessed." She had just finished when a man in tattered clothes approached their table, asking for a bite to eat. He hadn't had food all day. Both to get rid of the man and to assuage a guilty conscience, the husband took the intruder to the counter to buy him a sandwich. While they were gone, the 6-year-old daughter insightfully said, "See, Mommy, your prayer did come true. You prayed for Jesus to be our guest. And he did." The God of truth and life comes more often in tattered clothes at the end of a long and arduous day or through the naïve but profound insights of a child than in theologies and certainties about God. Why do we stand around looking at the clouds when there's a man who needs to be fed?

Faith allows us to believe in God without knowing much about God, without understanding God's ways. Why do you stand there gazing into heaven? We may not be able to see the end of the week, let alone see God. But remember that even the best automobile lights illuminate only a few yards down the road, yet we can drive all the way through the night like that. We may not understand why God's ways are not our ways, but faith illuminates the next step. And we can go all the way through life like that. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal spirit, who guides us whether we walk in green pastures, beside still waters or through the valley of the shadow of death, we come to acknowledge your presence in our lives. We come from a plethora of details and data and frenetic activity to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and hearts today.

If we have come out of joy and celebration today, grateful for the blessings that have been given us, may our blessings overflow unto others, that our fortunate condition be made sacred by our service to our society.

If we have come today with resentment and bitter spirit, we pray that in this sanctuary we will be raised to a nobler mood. Overcome our negativity by inspiring us to deeds of service that are redemptive to both giver and receiver.

If we have come today saddened by the injustice and hardships imposed upon us, touch us with courage that we may not be beaten down by hopelessness. Set us on our feet again, revived and reinforced to be love and hope incarnate in our little corner of the world.

If we have come with prejudice against those who are not like us, chasten us with a love that transforms our hardened dislikes into a graciousness of spirit to all.

If we have come today with sins which would hinder our best efforts and which thwart our ability to serve others, forgive and restore us. Likewise if we have been wronged by the sin of another, give us the magnanimity of spirit to forgive them even as we are forgiven.

If we have come today out of anxiety for the condition of the world, out of fear for our future, out of angst for loved ones, out of grief for our losses, out of hellish nightmares that disturb our sleep, ease our minds and hearts by your holy presence. Enliven us to the possibilities for wholeness and grant us the courage to bring into this world all that would save us in the world of your kingdom. In the name of the Christ of peace and hope, Amen.