

*The Ascending Hero*

by Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins

Sunshine Cathedral, Ascension Sunday 2009 (Mark 16.15-20)

My great-aunt Gladys was at the cemetery one day, weeping at a graveside. She kept saying over and over, "Why, why did you have to go? Why did you have to go?" A priest is there and approaches my great-aunt, and says, "I'm sorry ma'am, I don't wish to intrude, but I can't help but notice your intense grief. For whom are you mourning?" And Aunt Gladys said, "my husband Arthur's first wife."

Speaking of "going", today's readings from Acts and from Mark's gospel remind me of a song that my paternal grandmother used to sing (I don't know who wrote it). She was an elementary school teacher, and she someone knew that my only hope of understanding science was for it to be presented in the form of a performance. Make it a musical and I could get it, and so we'd have science sing-a-longs.

*Zoom a little zoom in a rocket ship,*

*off we go on a trip!*

*Heading for the moon at a rocket clip*

*We're going to zoom, zoom - rocket.*

*Zoom a little zoom, now we've almost free,*

*from the Earth's gravity.*

*Zooming to the moon at terrific speed*

*Because there is no friction.*

*Soon, we'll see if the Moon is made of green cheese ha, ha, ha, ha*

*Zoom we're here at the moon*

*let's see what the moon is like.*

Today we see Jesus zooming a little zoom to the beyond. What are we to make of that?

The most reliable manuscripts of Mark's gospel end with chapter 16, verse 8. In that story, Jesus has been executed and women are coming to his grave to perform a ritual, to say goodbye, to have some closure. The women find the grave empty, except for a stranger who tells them why it's empty, and the story ends at verse 8 with these words, "the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."

The story ends with the women, representing the wider community, going forward to sort out their fears, to deal with their uncertainties, to live with their unanswered questions, and to learn to trust the divine Presence within them along the way. Perhaps what Ascension represents is implied, but it is never spelled out.

This original ending suggests that Resurrection is something that is experienced but not understood, not seen, not explained. People find an empty tomb, and leave with questions and concerns, with fear and uncertainty. They have to keep going, keep questioning, keep looking to make sense of it. And that, to me, is a powerful ending...an open ending that we have to live into. The story isn't over because it becomes our story and we are still going forward, still letting the story unfold through us.

It was too ambiguous for some, however, and long after Mark was written, someone apparently added a longer ending meant to tie up loose ends. That longer ending is what we heard today.

In the later edition that we heard today, the fear and uncertainty that concludes the story at verse 8 are cleaned up. Rather than have people be uncertain, anxious, and searching, this later editor changes the story to have Jesus being found, and not just found but speaking very harshly against those who have doubts. Perhaps the writer was annoyed with people in his or her community who had doubts.

The later editor also adds that those who have strong faith will go on to confront evil, to speak in powerful and prophetic ways, to survive the venomous and poisonous attacks from their political and religious enemies; and, perhaps most importantly, they will help others experience hope and wholeness in their lives. And to be sure, faith is empowering, as is courage and hope, and those who can summon those qualities are able to do amazing things in their lives.

This longer, later ending is a much tighter, cleaner, neater, happy ending. Do you like the ending provided by Mark in verse 8 where there are more questions than answers and only the promise that as we keep going we'll find what we need; or do you prefer the ending we heard today that someone wrote decades later and tacked onto Mark's - an ending that encourages faith and

courage and promises that such tools can be used very effectively in our lives? Luckily, we have the two versions to choose from and we can choose whichever version speaks most personally to us today. Perhaps one is better for us at one moment in time, and the other better at another moment. In any case, it is the image of ascension that we find in the longer, later ending that is our theme for today.

In Genesis 5.24 a fellow named Enoch just disappears. The story says simply that Enoch walked with God, and at age 365 (perhaps a bit of an embellishment), Enoch leaves this world without dying. He's just taken away.

In the 2nd chapter of 2 Kings, Elijah, a prophet of God, is whisked away in a whirlwind to the heavens. His disciple Elisha witnesses it, and receives the anointing of the prophet's spirit: a theme that is somewhat repeated today and next week in the stories of Ascension and Pentecost.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, Mary, the Blessed Lady, is assumed bodily into the heavens...like Enoch and Elijah, without going through the usual process of dying.

In Greek mythology, the phoenix ascends from its own ashes to new life.

When Caesar Augustus died, his body was cremated on a funeral pyre, and as his body burned, a Senator claimed to see Caesar's spirit rising to the heavens to reign among the stars.

The rising, soaring hero is an ancient and recurring archetype. It reminds us that the hero is indestructible, because the hero is an inner Reality that we can each access. We see the spirit of the hero in the life of Jesus or Buddha or Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks or Barbara Harris, but that spirit isn't limited to them. The rising, soaring hero is part of us. Ascension reminds us that the heroic spirit rises from within and among us.

The Consciousness of Christ, the divine Nature, the heroic spirit of God's universal goodness is within each of us, and it is constantly rising to its divine level raising us up as we focus on it and recognize its power and presence in our lives.

The story of the Ascension comes from a time when the world was thought to be flat and just above the imagined ceiling of the sky a heavenly realm was thought to exist. Gravity was not yet understood, outer space had not been explored, and entire continents remained unknown to the people who told this story. The egg cell had not yet been discovered, so, according to our

understanding of biology, these ancients didn't even really know where babies come from. In light of the scientific discoveries that have been made since this story was first told, it has to be more than a literal account of a gravity defying exit from a flat earth.

But viewed as a spiritual allegory, the truth of this story can be discovered and rediscovered in every age, and even new truths can be discovered as we ponder the possibilities.

Our story today suggests that the universal heroic spirit, the Christ in us, is ascending to glorious heights of potential and possibility. As we allow this story to become our story, we find that we are rising above our fears, our mistakes, our regrets, our limitations. We are rising to new levels of optimism, happiness, fulfillment, confidence, and peace.

As we confront injustice and oppression (or demons), as we learn to speak in powerful, prophetic and radically inclusive ways (or new tongues), as we learn that we can survive the venomous and poisonous attacks of fundamentalist religion (or handling snakes), as we go about trying to offer hope and healing to all who are wounded, discouraged or psychically depleted...we will find the heroic energy that is within us, that is made in the divine image and that is ever-living and infinitely loving is raising us up to the heights for which we have been destined. As we access the hero within us, we ascend to our divine potential and from there we are able to continue Sharing the Light with the World.

This is the Good News. Amen.

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*Divine Love raises me above my fears.*

*Divine Love raises me above my regrets.*

*Divine Love raises me above my mistakes.*

*Divine Love raises me to my highest potential.*

*And I am abundantly blessed.*

*Amen.*

"I have seen people resurrected by love. I have watched beauty transcend ugliness, love overcome hatred, faith transform fear, life overcome death. This is Christpower, and it is not alien or foreign to our world." Bishop John S. Spong