

“Did Jesus really just rise up to heaven?”

March 13, 2011

Grove Presbyterian Church

Once upon a time there was a meeting of the Safe School’s Council in a school district far, far, away. The agenda around this Courtly Round Table? Talking about fire alarms, camera systems, drug dogs, even a school resource officer (otherwise known as a police officer patrolling the school hallways).

At one point in the meeting the king of the schools mentioned that it might be helpful to hold a series of community forums to discuss how we can keep our kids safe.

To which the jester sitting at the bottom of the table politely raised his hand and suggested that that really isn’t the correct question. How is easy to answer. Many on the committee seemed to want to sell the public on the measures raised. A few others argued for a more disinterested public discussion of the pros and cons.

How can we make them safe? That’s easy, he says flippantly. A police officer in each classroom. Complete coverage by surveillance cameras. Cameras in the school buses and bathrooms. Security checkpoints at each door. Frisking. Curfew. Getting rid of those perilous playgrounds. Fingerprinting every person who drives up in the SUV brigade to pick up their child. Make sure everyone wears their helmet, 24 hours a day (“I’ve got my helmet on; nothing can do me wrong...”). Or better yet, padded rooms with lots of locks. And lots and lots of rules.

Let’s turn every school into Hogwarts with Headmistress Dolores Umbridge in charge, nailing all sorts of rules on the plaques on the walls.

Educational Decree 26: Teachers are hereby banned from giving students information that is not strictly related to the subject they are paid to teach.

Educational Decree 30: All Weasly Products will be banned immediately

Educational Decree 133: Any unauthorised textbooks will be confiscated immediately from the offending student

Oh yes, then recruit the good students to encourage the other students obey the rules.

What is this? Are we at a tennis match, bobbing back and forth trying to decide between opposite polarities? Big Brother or anarchy?

So the question isn’t ‘how.’ How’s easy. The better question is ‘at what price security?’

It's understandable. We're scared. We're protective. Worry worries us. The administration and staff do have a fiduciary obligation to insure our children an environment of security.

But it is understandable. We long for something reliable, something steady. With so much slipping through our fingers, so many chances missed, we need to cling to something dependable.

But no one, no one -- not the king, not mom and dad, not Jesus -- can guarantee safety. There always will be the big bad wolf knocking on the door. Or earthquakes. Or tsunamis.

[pause for silent prayer]

Then it was suggested that regardless how many surveillance cameras may be installed, they fail to make us moral persons. They only shift the behavior elsewhere, where it cannot be monitored in grainy black and white.

More rules do not make us better persons, only compliant – for as long as we hope to be rewarded or wish to avoid being punished

We take a lesson from the Women's Center which has only two rules for their shelter. They use to have a wall full of prohibitions, a laundry list of rules, usually the result of some woman doing something she shouldn't have. Of course, a scrupulous list of prohibitions requires even more diligent enforcement.

Instead, the Women's Center posts two simple rules: 1) if it illegal out there, it is illegal in here; 2) you will do nothing to harm anyone.

Pretty much everything comes under these two rules. Everything else then becomes teachable moments.

Rather than seeking to control bad behavior, the Women's Center wants to encourage and empower good choices, providing choices rather than supplying solutions you should accept. It's the empowerment model.

Rather than engineering conformity, they open up chances for transformation. One dulls you, the other readies you. One molds, the other educates. One keeps you a child, the other makes you an adult.

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Imagine the Ascension of Jesus Christ as the original, ultimate, empowerment model.

Listen to the affirmation of Christ's Ascension, forty days after Easter, ten days before Pentecost:

**In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.**

**While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”**

**So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, 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 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, 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 heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”**

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What is the last confirmation class question?

Did Jesus really just rise up to heaven?

Jesus ascending isn't some teleportation up there into the nebulous ether. Beam me up, Scottie.

Jesus ascending isn't as if he was lifted by helium balloons way up high in the sky, Dorothy going home in the State Fair hot air balloon.

Jesus ascending wasn't even his own doing. He was taken, he was lifted up. Just as with Easter, he didn't raise himself. He was raised. Just as with Pentecost, we cannot make ourselves spiritual; we are made spiritual beings, we become little Christs. We receive what we cannot achieve.

And Jesus ascending isn't him saying, “goodbye.” If that were the case, if I were one of the disciples, I'd be pretty bummed out. Three years getting in trouble with him, him dying, him being resurrected, then, poof – it was good knowing you. Bye bye. I'd feel cheated. I'd feel disappointed. I'd feel depressed and sad. I'd feel really scared.

But they weren't. Luke tell us in his gospel how after Jesus ascended the disciples 'returned with great joy [Luke 24:52]."

Joyous? You bet.

They're thrilled. For now they know for sure Jesus isn't absent. Never will be. His promise is come true. He's as good as his Word.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

--John 14: 18f

Jesus hasn't abandoned us to suffer alone and remain afraid of this rather unsafe and insecure world. We have something truly reliable. Depend on him.

It is because of the Ascension that we keep referring to Jesus in present tense rather than past tense. With the Ascension, Jesus enters an eternal, unlimited spiritual reality. He is free from us needing him in time and place.

Where do others today meet the Christ they cannot see?

They meet him when the **Word** is heard. They meet him when the **Sacraments** are celebrated and shared. They meet him when **Prayers** are offered. They meet him when we, defined and brought together (transformed) by these three (Prayer, Sacrament, and Word), dare act like him.

Absent? No. Abiding!

And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own...

He hasn't gone away. He's empowering us – in the very midst of this crazy, difficult, demanding, terribly unsafe world -- to be his, for us to become like him.

So, we (along with the apostles) are scolded: stop idling about wistful, obsessed with wishful thinking about those good ol' days when Jesus use to be with us.

He is. He shall be. With us. The Jesus of Palestine, limited in time and space, limited as to how many people he could meet, is now manifested, fulfilled, revealed as the universal Christ.