

*It'll Be Alright*

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**Ascension of the Lord**

**May 28, 2017**

**Acts 1:1-11**

**Ephesians 1:15-23**

**Luke 24:44-53**

I was waiting for a doctor recently when I started reading a very old issue of "Psychology Today." In particular, there was a good article about atheists' attitudes on a variety of things. I always find articles on atheism to be interesting, mostly because I struggle to understand atheism as a personal creed. I can empathize with agnostics – with those who really aren't sure about God. I can appreciate honest doubt about God, for the simple reason that if being a Christian meant never having any doubts, I wouldn't be up here speaking to you today. There were those among the people who knew Jesus, and saw him resurrected, who doubted. Doubt and uncertainty are positions of integrity. But I've never been able to accept the validity of a doctrine that says with absolute certainty that there is no chance that a greater power than we are exists.

Nevertheless, after reading this article in "Psychology Today," I found that I might have more in common with some atheists than I thought. For one thing, many people who call themselves atheists are really just people who have been turned off by the intolerance, violence, and generally un-God-like behavior practiced in God's name by religious people through the ages. And I'm right with them on that. I can't defend it. But to me, those things don't disprove God. In fact, they say very little about God, and very much about us.

The atheists quoted in the article consistently had another problem with Christianity. It was all the improbable, irrational, things the Bible asks us to believe – things like Incarnation, Transfiguration, and most importantly, Resurrection. One young atheist expressed his intolerance of people who claim to believe what he called a lot of "Bronze Age myths." Although I disagree with that young man's characterization, here again I think I can relate to the atheist position. We might as well face it. A lot of what is in the Bible defies our modern understandings of the physical world. It would be difficult to argue that much of what we believe isn't improbable and irrational. In fact, if you happen to be an atheist and you're looking for reasons to doubt what is in the Bible, then this week's lessons are right up your alley.

Today, the last Sunday of the season of Easter, we read two accounts of the Ascension of Christ into heaven. Both were written by Luke – one in his gospel, and the other from the Acts of the Apostles. The story goes like this. Jesus and a

group of his followers are on a mount called Olivet just outside Jerusalem. There he teaches them one last time, and then disappears inside a cloud. One moment he was there, and the next moment he was gone.

Things like that just don't happen, do they? With our modern sensibilities, we can't seriously accept the things this story asks us to believe. It must be some sort of metaphor. We have to analyze it; to modernize it so we can rescue some sort of meaning from it. But I'm wondering if we do ourselves a disservice if we let ourselves look at the story of the Ascension of Christ as something that has to be proven or disproven. Worse, I think, is if we've decided that this story has to be either a historical fact, or it is just some kind of "fable" that we can ignore. I know it goes against our grain, but maybe the best response when faced with a mystery is to just permit ourselves to be mystified. Our efforts to explain things might eliminate some of the shadows, but perhaps at the cost of removing all the light, too.

Paul said something wonderful in his letter to the Ephesians that Tim read for you today. He wrote, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you..." (Ephesians 1:17-18) Paul is giving some sound advice. What would happen with the Ascension if, instead of feeling that we are forced to either believe or disbelieve, we looked at it through the "eyes of our hearts?" What might it have to tell us about living our lives? What meaning could it have for us in life's problems? What might it say to someone who has lost a job, or just found out they have a serious illness, or is struggling in a relationship?

There was a fun and rather quirky movie from six years ago that gives some interesting context for thinking about this. The movie was called "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel." In it, one of the characters shares a personal philosophy that has some appeal: "Everything is going to be alright in the end. If things aren't alright, it just means it's not the end."

This quote didn't originate with the movie. I've seen it attributed to John Lennon, and others, but nobody seems to know where it came from. I think I probably remember it because at the time, Sara declared it her "new favorite quote." And as "favorite quotes" go, it's not bad.

But it also occurs to me that if we were looking for a summary statement of the meaning of the Ascension, in fact, of the entire message of the Easter season, then we might have to look long and hard to find a better one. Isn't that really what our Easter faith proclaims? If things are not alright in the end, it just means it's not the end. But I would make one important modification: what it really means is that God is not finished yet.

Think about it. The world ended for the disciples on Good Friday. Their friend, their leader, was brutally murdered, hung on a cross to die, and laid in a stone tomb. The disciples were dazed and confused, hiding behind locked doors in fear of their own lives. But on Sunday they found the stone rolled away, and the tomb empty. At first they found it impossible to believe, but as they encountered the Risen Christ over the next forty days they came to realize that what they thought was the end, wasn't. On that first Easter morning, God had proclaimed that the worst thing would not be the last thing. God would have the day. And God was not finished.

The disciples on the Emmaus road didn't even recognize Jesus, or feel his presence when he walked and talked with them. They were caught up in their loss and grief. They were too busy mourning the end of all their hopes. It was only later when Jesus broke the bread with them that he was made known to them. And in that wonderful moment Christ suddenly vanishes. But as they run back to the rest of the disciples, Christ is still so powerfully present to them that they know in their hearts that what they had thought was an ending was really a beginning. They knew God wasn't finished.

We can only imagine what the disciples felt in today's reading. Their Messiah, the friend whom they loved, and who loved them, once taken from them and then restored to them, has been taken from them again. As they stood, looking up into the sky, they must have had a thousand questions. Why did this happen again? What will become of us? What will we do now? I'll bet this was the lowest of the low points for them.

But Luke tells us in the gospel account that they returned to the temple praising God. It's not clear what accounts for the change. Perhaps they remembered Christ's promise "Lo, I am with you always." Maybe it was the words of the strange men in Acts who ask them why they are still standing there, looking up into the heavens. It's more of an invitation than a question, really, as if to say, "Why are you still here staring? He's not gone for good. It's time to begin living the life to which he called each of you." Maybe they realized that if things weren't alright just then, it only meant that God wasn't finished yet. Whatever it was, they leave there full of joyful hope – a hope that would prove well-founded shortly thereafter, when God's presence would come upon them so profoundly at Pentecost.

Ultimately, it's all about hope, isn't it? Hope is what we find when we can look at the Ascension and all the stories of our faith through the eyes of our hearts. Hope isn't something we analyze and explain, it's something that surrounds us and pervades us. It's something we live. And I guess that's one of the things that puzzles me most about atheism. I don't understand where the atheist turns to find hope. What is the reason to have any expectation that anything – our selves, our situations, those around us, or the world we inhabit – will ever be alright. But for me as a Christian, nobody has ever answered that question better than Paul did when he wrote to the church in Rome: "I am convinced that neither death nor life,

neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

Things will be alright in the end. If things are not alright, it just means it's not the end. God isn't finished yet. You know, as “favorite quotes” go, it's a pretty good one. It's got the makings of a pretty good prayer, too.