

Ascension Sky

*“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.”*
(Acts 1:11)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Ascension Sunday, **May 13, 2018**
(Volume 1 Number 43; a message for The Gathering service)
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This past Thursday was *Ascension Day*, forty days after Easter. On Ascension Day Christians do well to look to the sky, to look to the Beyond with eyes of faith. Contemplating the *Ascension* of Jesus colors the sky with a blue brilliance of Blessed Hope of the church, Jesus' return in glory.

Having described Easter's empty tomb in his gospel, now Luke opens the Acts of the Apostles by describing how Jesus ascended into heaven on the fortieth day. A ten day period of waiting followed, leading to Pentecost, which we celebrate next Sunday. These 40 and 10 are together the Great Fifty Days of Easter.

Did any of you celebrate *Ascension Day* this past Thursday? Did you gather? Worship? Perhaps enjoy a celebration meal? No? Me either. I wonder why, since *Ascension* is such a vital component of the Easter narrative, its importance highlighted in the creeds of the early church. *“On the third day he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”* In these creeds, *Ascension* occupies equal footing with the Resurrection and Return of Christ.

Yet, for most Protestant Christians, especially in the West, *Ascension Day* passes virtually unnoticed. Very different is the Christian world of the east, where *Ascension Thursday* is a major feast day within the Orthodox tradition. Nor is it simply an East/West difference, or a Protestant/Catholic difference. Even among Protestants Christians in the West, the emphasis on the Ascension varies. In some areas of Germany, for example, where there are strong Lutheran traditions, *Ascension Thursday* is a school holiday. So central is the Ascension to Lutheran tradition that many Lutheran churches use the word *Ascension* in their church names. I Googled *“Ascension Lutheran Church”* and found dozens, but Googling *Ascension United Methodist Church*, the only one I found was in Louisiana, named not for the biblical story of the Ascension but because the church is in Ascension Parish, a parish between Baton Rouge and Lake Pontchartrain. *United Methodist Church of the Resurrection*, yes! *United Methodist Church of the Ascension* . . . not so much.

Rev. Keenan Kelsey, a Presbyterian pastor from San Francisco, writes of visiting Chartres Cathedral in France, which is beyond question one of the grand achievements in the history of architecture and a pilgrim destination since the 12th century. Rev. Kelsey describes her awe in viewing the biblical scenes sculpted in stone, forty-one friezes depicting stories of the Bible. She

writes of the wonder gripping her as she reverently toured the church when, suddenly, she found herself inexplicably laughing. “*Into the hushed and echoing sacred space, into the meditations and whispers of meandering visitors, I guffawed. I surprised and embarrassed myself. I couldn’t help it. In the midst of all the seriousness, the carved scene of the Ascension showed earnest and distressed disciples gazing up, and Jesus’ feet dangling down from the top of the stone frame. (I found it) really very funny.*”

Can you picture that? I’d like now to share with you several paintings from church history showing how artists have imagined the *Ascension*. I’ll begin with a painting that is much like the scene Rev. Kelsey just described, *Jesus Dangling*.

This painting is by the German artist Hans Suss von Kulmbach, from Nuremberg, who was born in 1480. This Ascension painting was completed in 1513 at the age of 33, and currently resides in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Other than Jesus’ feet dangling, the work clearly focuses on the wonderment of the disciples.

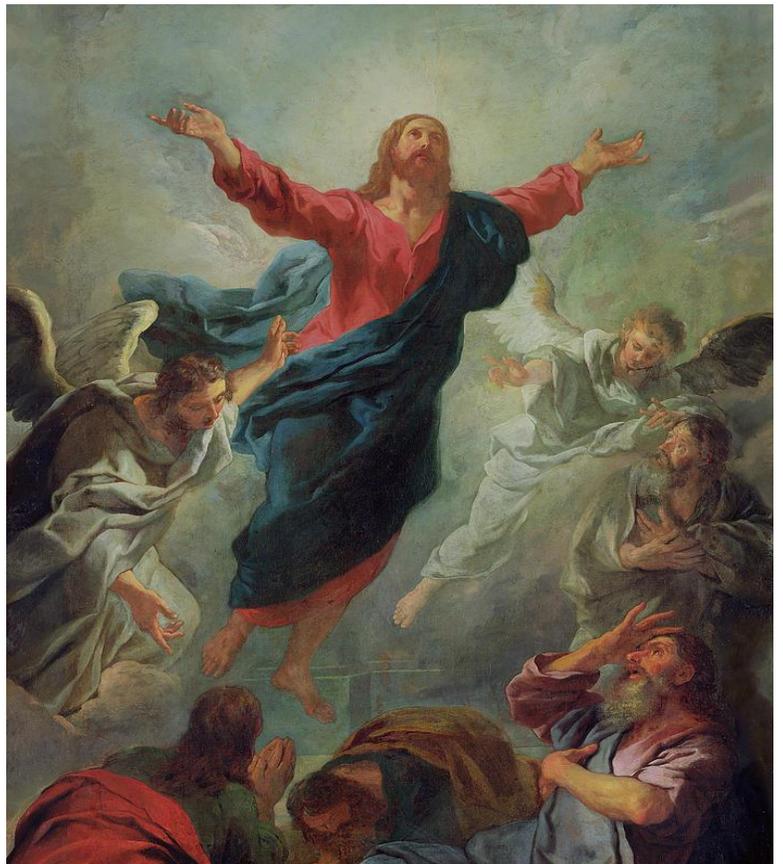


Next I offer the 1636 work of Rembrandt, who at the age of 30 was commissioned to paint the Resurrection and the Ascension. Notice how he focuses, not on the disciples wonderment (it is certainly there, but darkened), but rather on Jesus’ expression and open armed expectation and joy as he is carried aloft on a cloud by infant angels. Think of this painting as *Jesus Lifted*. This painting resides in Munich at the Alte Pinakothek Museum.



I especially love this third painting from 1585, a work from Venice at the hand of Paolo Veronese. I'll call it *Jesus Stepping*. Here we see Jesus actively walking, the heavens themselves appearing to sprout trees for his stepping. I love how Veronese portrays the "Cloud of Witnesses," a golden choir surrounding Jesus. The disciples below are in obvious disarray, lacking the order of our first two paintings. For Veronese, it is heaven that knows order and joy. This painting now resides in Rome at the Musei Capitolini.

My fourth offering is a painting I especially love, the 1721 work of the French artist Jean Francois de Troy. I think of it as *Jesus Soaring*. The angels are adult and the disciples, while few, are in utter amazement as Jesus seems to defy gravity and soar. This painting, abundantly available online in reproductions, resides at the Musee des Beaux-Arts in Rouen, Normandy, France. I look forward to actually being in Normandy next month, on June 25 on our Paris/Normandy cruise. In Normandy, where so many gave their lives as a sacrifice for freedom, what a wonderful place to have a painting of Christ leading the march to victory!





My last offering, one I confess to not liking much, is a modern painting (1958) of the Ascension by Salvador Dali. I call it *Jesus Abducted*, since Jesus appears to be an unwilling participant, noted especially by Jesus' fingers contracted to show pain and fear.

Dali says he was inspired to paint the Ascension in this way after experiencing what he called a "*Cosmic Dream*" in 1950. What modernity has done to

the doctrine of the Ascension is, I think, seen in this haunting image where Jesus seems not to be a participant, but rather drawn, if not dragged, away from earth. I see this painting and think of a patient carted into a medical procedure. Is the golden sphere the split nucleus of an atom so that Jesus is being drawn into Dali's energized, electrified view of the heavens?

As with most of Dali's painting of Jesus, his face is not visible, but the feet of Christ are draw us visually into the power of the atom, just as history itself, in the previous decade, had drawn the world into atomic power. Above Jesus, by the way, is Gala, Dali's Russian born wife who appears in many of his paintings, her eyes wet with tears. Dali's *Ascension* is part of the famed Simon Perez Collection.

So there you have it – *Jesus Dangling, Jesus Lifted, Jesus Stepping, Jesus Soaring, and Jesus Abducted* -- some of the ways artists have imagined the Ascension. I wonder. How would you have painted the Ascension?

Well, back to Rev. Kelsey visiting Chartres Cathedral. She was shocked at her reaction to the feet dangling frieze. It depicted an event central to her own faith, so why was she so incredulous? Had the Ascension story somehow hadn't made it in to her theological framework in the same way as the Resurrection? She wondered, having been born and raised in the West, had her theology accommodated scientific discovery in a way that disallowed her to conceive of heaven as a physical place in the sky, something that, to her, the Ascension demanded?



Reading her story caused me to reflect on how the Ascension has faded from emphasis in my own Holy Land visits. I often share images and stories from our itinerary. Today, I want to tell about a site we usually don't see, a site I haven't included in our itinerary since 1999. This is Ascension Chapel on the Mount of Olives. Most Protestant pastors from the United States who lead

tours to the Holy Land don't take their groups to the Ascension sites on the Mount of Olives. We are careful to point out the magnificent spire of the *Russian Orthodox Church of the Ascension*, but we barely even point out the smaller Chapel of the Ascension, an octagonal chapel from the Crusader period (built in the 12th century). Today it is a little mosque, but it is built to surround a stone slab on which is the vague image of a footprint. The place was

regarded by some early Christians as the last spot Jesus stood prior to the Ascension.

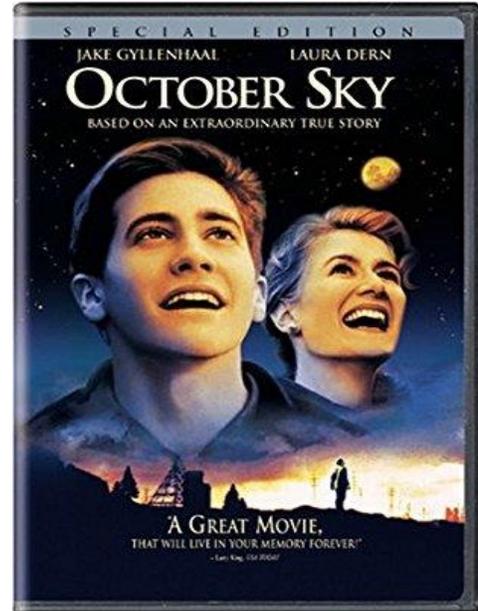
I thought of my first visit there in 1997. I recall looking at the footprint and thinking, "*Are you kidding me?*" At least for Protestant pastors from the West, the site conveys more the sense of superstition than of wonder, like geological formations on the surface of Mars appearing to look like a pyramid or a human face or a mouse.

I'm reminded of the story several years ago of a South America supermarket that made the supermarket tabloids when what appeared to be a shadowy outline of the face of Jesus appeared on an outside wall after a rainstorm. Hundreds came to pray at the image, some sick claiming to go away cured. A few days later, another thunderstorm revealed a new image beside the first, and it was clearly Julio Iglesias. What was happening is that whitewash was coming off which had been applied over an old advertisement for Julio Iglesias and Willie Nelson singing, "*To All the Girls I've Loved Before.*" One supermarket tabloid hushed the stir when the next headline read, "*That's not Jesus, it's just old Willie.*"

I've asked myself this week, what can we learn from gazing into an *Ascension Sky*? I find an answer in John 14, when Jesus prepares his disciples for his coming departure, saying that when he goes to the Father, he will send the Holy Spirit. He says, "You will do the works that I do, and greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

My title, *Ascension Sky*, is a nod to a wonderful film released in 1999, *October Sky*, based on the autobiographical story told by Homer Hickam, Jr. in his book, *Rocket Boys*. The story takes place in 1957 when Homer, the son of a coalmine superintendent from Coalwood, West Virginia, was a 15 year old freshman in high school. The story begins with Homer's gaze, not skyward, but downward, into the dusty footprints of the coalmines. Nor dare he look up.

In 1957, few kids from Coalwood were able to go to college. Scholarship opportunities weren't as abundant then as they are today. Most boys in Coalwood finished high school to find employment in the coalmines. Those who did go to college usually did so by winning athletic scholarships. While Homer hated the thought of spending his life in the coalmines, he wasn't talented in sports, so his future in the mines seemed fairly certain. Homer didn't dare look up. His gaze was earthward, seeing only dusty footprints as his destiny.



Until *Sputnik* blazed across the *October Sky*. On that October night in 1957 Homer Hickam lifted his gaze into the heavens. Sputnik, a Russian satellite that was the first to achieve orbit, gave birth to his dream. Actually visible as it made its orbit, Sputnik was a foreboding Cold War signal that the Russians were a step up on America's space program. One of Homer's friends responded to that fear, "Let the Russians have space. We've got rock and roll."

For Homer, though, gazing into that *October Sky* fueled a dream. Homer and his five friends, the *Rocket Boys*, began test-firing their own rockets, enduring ridicule from the community. The opening words of the book are, "Until I began to build and launch rockets, I didn't know my home town was at war with itself over its children, and that my parents were locked in a kind of bloodless combat over how my brother and I would live our lives." Some wanted tradition to be honored. Down into the coalmines, stepping in the footprints of the fathers, was no question an honorable tradition. Others, particularly Homer's science teacher, Ms. Riley, thrilled at Homer's newfound interest, wanted kids to have more opportunities.

Homer began learning all he could about rockets. With an autographed picture of his hero, atomic physicist Werner von Braun, Homer began test-firing his own rockets. Though misunderstood at first, his dream led him to develop a high school science project that won the state science fair and, with it, a scholarship to college. That led to a long career at NASA. When he finally retired he was training astronauts for Space Shuttle missions.

In the “*For What It’s Worth*” department, Homer at first didn’t like that the studio rejected his book title, *Rocket Boys* in favor of *October Sky* until he realized that *October Sky* was an anagram of *Rocket Boys*, i.e., *October Sky* used the exact same letters, re-arranged.

May I offer you another anagram? The same letters in Ascension spell Canonises (the British spelling of canonizes). To Canonize is make official, to place within a canon, as we speak of the “Canon” of scripture to be those books of our Bible which have met the standard to be included as sacred text. Let’s keep the Ascension in the Canon of our faith.

Homer once wrote a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed piece in which he encouraged the Bush Administration to pursue space with SSTO technology — *Single Stage to Orbit*. That simply means developing spacecraft that can get into orbit without having to drop stages along the way. It has always been the Holy Grail of the space business. Imagine how expensive it would be if every truck transporting goods from coast to coast had to throw off several engines every time it made a haul, and it’s easy to see the benefits of SSTO.

Homer opens his article by quoting Robert Heinlein, “*Reach low orbit and you’re halfway to anywhere in the solar system.*” In other words, once you lift out of the gravity well of Planet Earth, the vast majority of the difficult lifting work has been accomplished.

Perhaps that’s what Jesus is saying in John. “*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do . . . and greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.*” In other words, “*I’ve done the heavy lifting. Now, you’re halfway to anywhere you want to go. My lift, the lift of my Resurrection and Ascension, has propelled you away from the powerful gravity well of Death.*”

Do you recall how, on Easter, we sang the words of Charles Wesley, *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*? I love the 4th stanza, as it connects the resurrection to the Ascension, and invites us to follow . . .

“*Soar we now where Christ has led,
following our exalted head;
Made like Him, like Him we rise;
ours the cross, the grave, the skies.*”

May your gaze on this Ascension Sunday, be into an *Ascension Sky*.

