

## Staying Power

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Today is Ascension Sunday in the church calendar year. In my opinion, this story is even weirder than the resurrection.

Jesus defies gravity.

We just heard a story about Jesus telling the disciples that they will be empowered by the Spirit to share Good News throughout the world, and then when he finishes his teaching, he is lifted up to the sky, and floats away in a cloud.

Curious about as to how others have preached about this oddity, I turned to a popular website for preachers that lists resources from commentaries to sermons to ideas for Sunday School.

“It is no illusion”, one sample children’s sermon claims.

Yew. Seriously.

Personally, I believe spiritual formation around bible stories should be framed in wonderment and inquisitiveness, like the Montessori approach to religions education called “Godly Play.” A Godly Play session is centered around telling a Bible story, and then invites children to engage with the text with “wondering questions” such as, “I wonder what you think Jesus meant when he said ‘the spirit’ will be with you?”

You may have heard of lectio divina, or holy reading, a devotional way of reading and reflecting on small bites of scriptures. I think of Godly Play as Lectio Divina Curiositas—Holy Curious Reading.



Ascension (Small Passion) Albrecht Dürer, 1612

But wait, I need to warn you. Apparently curiosity is a vice. Both St. Augustine (3rd century) and Thomas Aquinas (11th century) named curiosity as an official vice. Turns out monks who could read were voracious in their pursuit of knowledge when they had access to libraries. Both Augustine and his Middle Ages disciple Aquinas believed that this kind of curiosity and thirst for deeper intellect and wider knowledge was overdone. Too much reading! Maybe the issue was that the book hungry monks were ignoring their other duties of cooking potatoe soup for the hungry outside the walls of their peeling potatoes in scullery for the soup kitchen for the hungry crowding the walls of the monastery and supporting widows and children. It's not clear to me.

It seems like an antiquated idea, thinking of curiosity as a vice. But, I found a lot of current articles regrading the evils of curiosity in the spiritual life:

One writer frames it this way:

*“The vice of curiosity works with the deadly sin of acedia, often translated as sloth. Acedia is a reluctance to engage in spiritual activities. If you have a free hour in the evening, acedia is the negative influence to not pray or read a spiritual book. The vice of curiosity then steps in and pushes you to see what is on social media or tune into the next television episode.”*

I suppose the writer is urging people to pray more rather than playing more, but then I am curious...who decides what is spiritual and what is sloth?

As I succumbed to the vice of curiosity by spending a lot of time reading about it, I wondered if naming curiositas as a vice has been, at times, a ploy to keep people in their place, or control them. I read an article composed in 2018 blaming EVE for the birth of this vice:

*“The real mother of curiosity...was our first parent, Eve. She was curious to know why she was not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. So she was willing to find out by turning to a famous Serpent who told her: ‘No worry. You were lied to. You won’t die.’ Needless to say, Eve’s curiosity eventually did kill her, and evidently the rest of us to boot. And we are still curious about the forbidden fruit. We keep setting up our own definitions of what is good and what is evil.”*

Methinks this smacks of sexism and patriarchy. And so, viva la curiositas, I say! We must encourage curiosity when it comes to investigating hard held beliefs, dogma, boxed in thinking, especially regarding our faith stories in scripture.

Think of the curiosity and creativity it took for Luke, the author of Acts, to write such a yarn about Jesus ascending into the clouds. It literally begs curiosity. I have all the questions for this story in Luke:

I wonder, did Jesus know he was going to be scooped up in the clouds?

I wonder what his disciples were feeling and thinking? Were they sad? Afraid?

I wonder how long they really stood there, looking up in the sky?

I wonder, was Luke high when he wrote this?

I wonder, what was Luke trying to communicate about God in this story?

I wonder what was Luke trying to communicate about Christ to those hearing this story?

When I visually picture this story, I see Jesus floating like an escaped helium balloon, going up, up and away, getting smaller and smaller so that soon he becomes a dot in the sky and then altogether disappears. By defying gravity ala the musical *Wicked*, Jesus disappears.

And I suppose, this is part of the point of the ascension. Because, by Jesus disappearing, his friends have to find that little piece of Christ in themselves and continue to share the gospel of light and love to those who desperately need it.

Jesus disappears, so that Spirit can appear in a multiplicity of ways to usher in the kin-dom of God's community.

My preaching professor, Dr. Barbara Lundblad has a beautiful sermon about the ascension. She tells a story about The Nurturing Place, a center that welcomes children whose families are homeless, families with no addresses. One day the children were on a field trip to the Jersey shore.

Barbara recalls:

*The 3 and 4 year olds scrambled up the sandy dunes, falling and giggling their way to the top of what must have seemed like mountains to their little legs. When they got to the top, they could hardly believe their eyes: water as far as they could see — more water than they had ever seen. They slid down the dunes and ran to the ocean's edge. They chased the waves that teased their toes. Then they went off for a picnic in a nearby park. After lunch they begged to go back to the dunes. One little boy named Freddie outran the rest and climbed his way to the top. He looked out, then turned to the others and shouted, "It's still there!"*

*In Freddie's short life, so much had disappeared — even the ocean could disappear over lunch. We're older and wise enough to know the ocean is there even when we're not looking. But we're not so sure about other things. We may feel a bit like the poet who said: you discover that "... you live in a different place though you have never moved." We're scrambling up the sandy dunes, trying to find a place that will hold.*

Lundblad continues:

*Jesus' disciples must have felt the earth slipping beneath their feet at the thought of being left alone. Again. It had been a roller coaster ride of emotions since they followed Jesus into*

*Jerusalem — hope, fear, death, and then the unbelievable presence of Jesus — no longer dead, but alive.*

*But they knew he wouldn't stay. Indeed, Jesus speaks as though he's already gone: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you ... " Isn't he still with them? His words must have seemed very confusing.*

Of course it's confusing.

And while they are staring at the feet of Jesus in the sky, two messengers come to question their focus on the clouds:

Lundblad describes it like this:

*There's a wonderful woodcut of Jesus' ascension by Albrecht Durer. If you look closely at the picture — not up in the clouds, but on the ground — you can see footprints on the earth. Durer has carefully outlined Jesus' footprints down on the level where the disciples are standing with their mouths open. Perhaps the artist was simply imagining a detail that isn't in the text. Or perhaps, he is asking us, "Why do you stand looking up into heaven?"*

Friends, we often get caught in staring at what isn't there, when just before it was there~~like the disciples looking up into heaven.

We have hope, but then it can disappear in a moment.

We have a marriage, but it vanishes when your spouse tells you they are having an affair.

We have confidence, but it dissolves when we falter.

Where is the staying power of Love when all hope disappears?

Where is the staying power of the Holy, when all that is unholy wipes out the good?

Perhaps it takes looking for the imprints of the Holy outside of ourselves, where it has been before it vacated our lives, dissipated, evaporated? Those footprints are everywhere~~ at tables with unusual guests, with children in fields, at the dogpark with frolicking canines, with the wealthy and poor, in the questions and curiosity.

Here is the thing, sometimes we are caught dumbstruck, staring into the clouds, before those angels appear, right? And that's fine. Because even though Jesus disappeared, he promised the disciples over and over again that they would not be alone. That is staying power.

This is the same for us. We are not left alone. The Spirit breathes all around us and surprises us. The mystery of the Spirit, the presence of Community will always be there. We are not left alone.

We will forget it when our worlds crumble and all that was familiar disappears. When we are smacked with the brutality of relationships and the pain of betrayal. When we get bored and are

trudging on daily routines of living. We will forget the presence of Spirit. We will feel isolated. There is no questions of forgetting, because we all do, at some time or another. No question of that.

But, as my amazing preaching professor Barbara says *“If we forget and imagine that we’re in this all by ourselves, if we trust only in our own efforts, I hope we’ll hear a little boy named Freddie calling out to us: “It’s still there!”*

It’s still there.

That is staying power.

Amen.

## **SOURCES**

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<https://curiositas.acclahc.org/>

“[curiositas](https://curiositas.acclahc.org/), an intense, almost meddlesome curiosity at the heart of courses dedicated to studying the liberal arts.”

James V. Shall, S.J., The Catholic Thing, December 15, 2018, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2018/12/15/on-curiosity/>