

*Endings and Beginnings*

A movie needs a good ending. The conclusion needs to resolve the plot and tie up the loose ends. In *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy gets back to her home in Kansas; in *Citizen Kane* we find out that Rosebud was his sled; and in *Casablanca* Rick and Louis begin a beautiful friendship. Sometimes the movie ending sets up a sequel. For instance, the original *Star Wars* ends with Luke Skywalker and Han Solo going off to rescue Princess Leia. That ending would spawn two *Star Wars* sequels and three prequels.

Luke, the gospel writer, not the Jedi Knight, does a pretty good job of resolving the plot and tying up the loose ends in the conclusion of his panoramic biography of Jesus. Luke's gospel ends with the risen Christ being carried up into Heaven and his disciples worshipping him. We call that the Ascension. That ending explains why Jesus isn't re-appearing and disappearing among us today the way he did with his followers immediately following his Resurrection. Jesus, who came from the Father in Heaven, comes full circle and returns to the Father in Heaven at the end of Luke's gospel, and we today are invited to be part of the crowd that continues to worship the ascended Christ .

What's interesting is that the man called Luke, who wrote of the gospel that bears his name, is also the author of the Book of Acts, also known as the Acts of the Apostles. Acts is the sequel to Luke's gospel. Luke begins the first chapter of Acts by retelling the story of Jesus' Ascension, his rising up into Heaven, from just a slightly different perspective. In the last chapter of

his gospel, Luke had Jesus instruct his disciples to wait in Jerusalem to receive what the Father had promised, which we find out in the first chapter of Acts to be the Holy Spirit. Next week, Pentecost Sunday, we will read the second chapter of Acts and hear about how the Holy Spirit came to the disciples. The Acts of the Apostles continues Luke's gospel in that the ministry of the ascended Christ is continued on earth by the Holy Spirit working through Jesus' Apostles – but I'm getting ahead of myself, more on that next week.

Luke tells us that after Jesus disappeared from the Apostles' sight, two men in white robes, we would call them angels, stood beside the Apostles and 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." Often the angels' statement has been interpreted to mean that we should not spend a lot of time or energy contemplating Heaven or the other mysteries of our faith, rather our primary emphasis should be on what we can do ourselves here on earth.

Undoubtedly there is some truth in that. We do have a mission here on earth to spread the gospel and to serve the needy. When the hungry need to be fed and those who do not know Christ need to be told about him, there is little time to debate the fine points of church doctrine. However, it is also true that the very foundation of our mission is the good news of Jesus Christ, good news that tells us Christ is raised from the dead and ascended into Heaven, and that we too shall arise and be with him in life everlasting. The point of all service to the needy is so that they might proleptically experience

the love and providential care of God. Our mission on earth is to always point others to Heaven, giving them a little Heaven on earth when we can.

If there ever was a time that Christians thought about Heaven to exclusion of living life fully here on earth, the pendulum has swung far in the other direction today. Today too many Christians think of heaven and the afterlife very little, if at all, and the general population is so absorbed in the concerns of our earthly life here that there is no room for any consideration of life beyond the grave. Many people today live as if this life is all there is to our existence. Many think that death is the end of all that we are. That, of course, is not the Christian position. In fact, we might say that our earthly lives here are just preparation for eternal life in Heaven. That's our real life.

Consider this: If Jesus is the focus of our Christian lives, and Jesus is in Heaven, then where should our focus be? If Christ is the center of our being, then how important are the things of this world really? In the sea of eternity the span of our life is like a single drop of water. When we are prosperous, happy, and healthy we may be deluded into thinking that whatever we have is all our own doing and we want to continue our lives here as they are indefinitely. When we are sick, sad, or impoverished, we often come to know then our complete reliance on God for everything and we long for Heaven. We should live knowing that heaven is our ultimate goal.

When we are fully relying on God for everything, when our hearts are set on heaven, then the ups and downs of this life don't bother us too much. Neither losses nor victories should change our frame of mind if we are thinking more about the life beyond this world than we are thinking about

life in this world. Nothing can upset our equilibrium if our sites are fixed on Jesus. Compared to the joys waiting for us in heaven, this world's pleasure and pains don't matter all that much to us.

Of course, I'm going to say that the word and sacrament are two ways that we have foretastes of Heaven. But there may be others. God has promised to be in those means of grace, but he has not limited Himself to those alone. Perhaps you have had a transcendental experience in life, a peak event where you felt especially close to God, a moment of clarity and insight, an experience of unbounded love and grace. It could be something happy like holding a newborn infant, or it could be something tragic like losing of a loved one, but in the moment you felt the sheer presence of God around and within you. That's an experience of Heaven on earth.

I encourage people, especially people in times of extreme pain or trouble, to think about life in Heaven, to think about being with Christ. Some might say that's using religion, as an opiate or painkiller, and I would respond, "Yes; so?" The gospel is a healing balm that does relieve our pain, not in a negative sense, like by lulling us into a stupor, but in a positive way, encouraging our faith. The hope our faith gives us is not a false hope -- to give false hope would be wrong -- but to soothe a person in physical, emotional, or spiritual pain with a vision of life with Christ and all his saints, that's a good thing. Not everything that makes us feel good is the gospel, but the pure proclamation of the gospel should make us feel good because it gives us life, and hope, and peace. Someone said that many a lifelong professing atheist has repented and called out to God for mercy from his deathbed, but never in recorded history has a Christian called out from his

deathbed for salvation from a scientist, politician, or philosopher. In the experience of transition from life to death to new life, the spiritual realities we attain to often become very clear to us.

What Christ has done for us, died, risen and ascended into Heaven, insures that our earthly story has a good ending. We are rescued from eternal death; our lives have a sequel. The life we have begun in this world will continue on with Christ in the life to come. We are Jesus' friends and Heaven will be our immortal home. That's his baptismal promise to us. Rely on that. Amen.