

## Bridging the Gap

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Acts 1:1-14; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

“While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.” --  
Luke 24:51

Today’s Ascension Sunday, and it’s one of those days in the church calendar when there’s a big pull-apart between the world view of the writers of the Bible and our world view. It happens in verse 51 of the 24th chapter of Luke: “While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.”

“Up” into heaven is the problem. As Bishop John Shelby Spong once said about this passage, if Jesus were carried “up” into heaven, we know he’s not in heaven, he’s in orbit, because heaven isn’t “up” there.

Heaven was “up there” for our religious ancestors because of their cosmology, the way they understood the physical world. Theirs was a common-sense cosmology. The earth appeared to our ancestors as flat – as, indeed, it does to us – and so they thought of the earth as a flat pancake resting on pillars that were sunk deep into the underworld, which was both dusty in places and watery in other places. They called that place Sheol and it was where all of us go when we die. It’s not a bad place, it’s just not the beautiful and wonderful place that the apparently flat earth is, and so there’s an element of sad resignation that Sheol is the fate awaiting all living creatures.

That’s what our ancestors saw when they looked out and when they looked down. When they looked up, they saw heaven – or what they called the heavens, plural – with its layers of clouds and sun and moon and stars and the glass-like dome they called the firmament, and the blue water above the firmament that constituted the rain, and up above that, somewhere, was the dwelling place of God. That’s the view of heaven that emerged about four thousand or so years ago, and that’s the view of heaven that the vast majority of religious people hold to this day – even though they know it’s wrong.

We know the earth isn’t flat, and we know that there isn’t a Pyrex bowl turned upside down holding back the blue waters of the sky that make it rain. That’s not our cosmology. Our religion keeps heaven “up there,” but our science puts it somewhere else. There’s the first gap that has to be bridged on Ascension Day.

And it’s not a new gap. Lots of gaps have opened in the history of all religions, including Christianity, between the ordinary, everyday lived experience of run-of-the-mill people, and the claims of believers about their supernatural revelation, with its frequent attendant miracles, neither of which are verifiable. Over the centuries, the ordinary everyday experience of common people has been refined and compartmentalized and specialized into modern science, and those are two of the battle lines that we live with today: the claims of evolutionary, biological, physical, and cosmological science, on the one hand, and the claims of miracles-in-history on the other.

The German philosopher Gotthold Lessing struggled with this problem back in the 18th century, and he coined a famous metaphor to describe the gap between our experience, which does not include miracles, and the testimonies of our ancestors, in which they claim to have experienced miracles. He said that there was an “ugly, broad ditch” between what he could verify from his own experience and what he was asked to

believe on the basis of the testimony of others. And try as he might, he couldn't cross that ditch.

Lots of thinkers since Lessing's time have tried to bridge that gap, and many of their efforts seem to boil down to this one, simple fact: the direct, living experience of the divine in one's life. That's the bridge that spans the gap between our lives and the lives of those who claim to have experienced the divine in their day and in their way.

The gap that has to be bridged by believers, not only on Ascension Sunday, but on every day, is the gap between what we know to be our lives and what we believe to be God's life. Not anything physical, because God isn't a physical reality. God's a spiritual reality in the midst of physical reality, but we continually trip ourselves up by thinking of spiritual realities in physical terms. Thus, heaven, a spiritual reality, becomes heaven, a physical reality, "up there." That's a mistaken way of thinking about heaven, even if our ancestors handed that way of thinking about it on to us. Part of developing a mature faith means being able to distance ourselves from the errors of our forebears, which were many, whether those errors were about the physical world or about the social world. Remember that until very recently, all of our religious ancestors, including Jesus and Paul, thought that slavery was a perfectly acceptable part of social reality. We don't, so how do we bridge that gap between their world and ours?

You do it by opening yourself up, sincerely and constantly, to the present-day spiritual reality that we call the Holy Spirit. You don't ask, as millions of evangelicals did not so long ago, "What would Jesus do?" You ask instead, "What would Jesus have me do?" My friend Greg Han, whom many of you have met, pointed out that distinction to me some years ago, and I remain grateful to him for forcing me to ponder it. You and I do not have the option of leaping backward across twenty centuries and entering the mind and heart of the historical Jesus; that's a fool's errand.

What you and I can do, however, is read in the pages of Scripture, attend to the teachings of the church, explore with a few trusted fellow believers, and listen with our souls to the voice of our still-speaking God to hear how we can live those eternal truths that do not depend on the accidents of history.

That's how you bridge the gap between world views. That's how you leap Lessing's ugly, broad ditch. You put your life in the space between the world of those old religious codgers who gave us the Bible and the Christian tradition, and us, and you experience for yourself the truths of love, justice, peace, and self-sacrifice. Christianity is proved in the living of it or it has no proof at all.

I want to close by calling to our collective memory the story of Antoinette Tuff, the clerk in McNair Elementary School in Decatur, Georgia, who talked a gunman out of shooting up her school with 800 students in it last August. She didn't do so by pleading or begging. She didn't do so by threatening or lying. She did so by bridging the gap between her world and his. She told him that she understood what he was going through. She told him that she, too, had experienced heartache. She told him that she, too, had considered suicide. She told him that he was loved and could choose a better path than inflicting pain and suffering on others to salve his own wounded soul.

She told him those things while she was on the phone with the 911 dispatcher getting both her school and the gunman help. And when the police arrived, they found the 20-year-old man lying face down on the floor with his arms already folded behind his back. Antoinette Tuff subdued that gunman because she responded to his threat of violence not with fear or with greater violence, but with love – love for her school, love for the children in her care, and love even for the man prepared to do them all harm.

In later interviews, Antoinette Tuff said she was more scared in those moments than she'd ever been in her life, but by bridging the gap through love between herself

and Michael Brandon Hill, she discovered, as so many others have, that “perfect love casts out fear.”

I don’t know about you, but if I needed proof that the Bible is, in its fundamentals true, I don’t need to look any farther than that. Antoinette Tuff showed me – and anyone who’ll look with an open heart and an open mind – that the Bible really is true. It’s true and it works.