

## Lifted Up

Ascension, Year A, 5/21/23

Parting, we are told, is such sweet sorrow. By whom are we told? By Shakespeare, no less, in the words that Juliet spoke from her balcony to her Romeo, thus:

Good night, good night. Parting is such sweet sorrow  
That I shall say good night till it be morrow.<sup>1</sup>

They have been talking all night, she from her balcony and he in the garden below, but they really must call it a night now, for the sky has begun to pale with the dawn. Which means that the lovers' joyful morrow is not far away, and anyway they agreed earlier to meet again at nine, if Juliet can arrange it. They know not that a more sorrowful and longer parting awaits them, one that neither intends but that neither is able to prevent. But "love is pretty when love is new," as Dolly Parton delicately wrote and beautifully sings, "like a blushing rose in a dazzling dew."<sup>2</sup> It may not last, but, oh, the beauty and promise while it does.

It is sad, but not too sad, to say goodbye when you say 'Hello!' again soon enough, and when all the time you've shared has been pleasant, or at least has brought you closer together. "But wherefore art thou Romeo?" Juliet asked, wailing, at one point during the night, gutted that her new and moonstruck lover turns out to be the son of her father's enemy; 'Why do you have to be *him*?' Yet they get past that, and quickly come to bind themselves as two united against a cruel world, confident that that young love can overcome old hate. It can – and in the play it does, after a fashion, and we would all of us be lost if it could not. Yet it only does so because such love cannot bear its own loss. Each of the lovers takes their own life when they think that

---

<sup>1</sup> Romeo and Juliet, II.2.186-7.

<sup>2</sup> Dolly Parton, "When Love is New." © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC. Online source: Lyricfind.

their beloved has died before them. At such partings there is no sweet sorrow, nor joy found for any upon the morrow.

What's remarkable about the stories of Jesus's ascension is that there's none of this involved, no sorrow at all. I mean, these people just got him back, and from the grave no less, but they take his sudden take-off and 'Abyssinia, folks' perfectly in stride, even if they have to angels tell them that the show is over, nothing more to see here, that's all the people we're lifting up today, y'all can go about your business, you've been a wonderful audience, thank you for coming. They take it all in like water off a duck's back. We won't see him again until that last and terrible day, but no worries, no tears, no sorrow at this parting, just the sweet sounds of the songs of the faithful, praising God on their way back to Jerusalem, Alleluia, Alleluia.

Well, if even at the grave we make our song "Alleluia, Alleluia," why not on the launch pads of Bethany?

But we do that ironically, hoping against hope, or against its impossibility, that those to whom we've said our last goodbyes we will see again, somewhere, somehow. Though all serious talk, even in the biblical material, about what the new life that is to come in the world beyond this one says that it will be utterly different than what we have now, not least because we shall be raised incorruptible, incapable of decay or diminishment, we like to think that the country from whose bourn no traveler returns will be much like this one, but better. As Patty Griffin's recent take on an gospel song has it, "We shall all be reunited in that land beyond the sky," even if we'll look forward more to seeing some we have lost than we will to seeing others.<sup>3</sup> As her song says at a key moment, "We shall meet beyond that river / In that land of pure delight / Where no sickness and no sorrow / Will our joys there ever blight."

---

<sup>3</sup> Newton S. Sitzlar, B. Batemen, "We Shall All Be Reunited," adapted and sung by Patty Griffin, *Downtown Church*. Sound recording. 2010. Original text is in the public domain.

If that's where Jesus was lifted up to, that land beyond the sky, beyond the river, where sorrow and sighing are no more, why would we lament his having been so? His story on earth has ended, and in triumph. Ours as his body remaining behind – “the fullness of him who fills all in all,” as Ephesians 1:23 puts it – now begins.

Philosophers and literary scholars have a saying, ‘What leaves through the door often comes back through a window.’ An idea that an artist or a school of thought has struggled to overcome, get beyond, or eschew often comes back in a different, if not always a much different, form. For all that Jesus and the early church tried to make clear that the key relationships people have in Christ's church are with one another, and that God's Spirit fills us with the gifts and power to make those relationships as good and gracious as those we long for in that land beyond the river and the sky, it didn't take too long for subsequent generations to find such relationships difficult, if not impossible, to sustain, and to want to trade them for relationships with Jesus that they could have as their very own. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock,” the author of Revelation heard Christ speak to the church in Laodicea, lukewarm of faith and fit to be spat out of his mouth, and, “If anyone hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to them, and will sup with them, and they with me” (Rev.3:20-21), but even then not as he did at Emmaus, actually breaking actual bread with them after having taught them from actual scriptures and then actually disappearing again.

A colleague of mine at an Episcopal church in California has preached how rapidly and vapidly this can become a heresy if one's relationship with a mythic figure comes at the expense of one's relationships with actual people, particularly of those given into one's care or part of in an otherwise-healthy family or community. One can easily make an idol of one's own ideals or longings, terrors or mysteries before realizing that one has done so. One can miss the very thing one seeks as one does so. As John Chrysostom said at one point, if you cannot find Christ in the beggar at your

door, you will not find him at the altar or in the sacraments, maybe not even on your knees at prayer. Our spiritual lives, after all, no less than all the law and the prophets, hang on the two great commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. God, for such reasons as God may know best, has chosen to be with us in Spirit and in truth, in the longings we have to make beautiful witness to life and its potential while we have the power to do so, in our desires to know and be known, to seek, to learn, to teach, to imagine, to create, to love, be safe, and be free, and not to stand gawping at the sky waiting for Jesus to return and make things right. God is not with us as an Other, but as the realization of ourselves, in what it means for us – for each of us, and for all of us – to flourish and rejoice and be fully alive. To live that way means to live with none to trouble or exploit us, deceive us or compel us to live as so much cheap labor or cannon fodder, sources of data to be mined or anxieties to be manipulated. To be fully realized, to be free, or to find God as God would be found – they all mean the same thing – one must do one of three things: be an artist, be a revolutionary, and I forget the third thing. We are made in the image of a God who creates, redeems, comforts, advocates, loves, and sets people free. We will find God best, I am convinced, when we are doing those things, as many of them as we can, and as often as we can.

Steinbeck's character Tom Joad puts much of this spirit in his parting words to his mother, near the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Tom feels he must leave his family for their own safety, and to continue his struggle against a situation in which “our people livin’ like pigs, an’ the good rich lan’ layin’ fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hundred thousan’ good farmers is starvin’.”<sup>4</sup> He has found that none can fight this battle for long alone, and that consequently no person’s

---

<sup>4</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (NY: Viking, 1939 [1967]), 435.

spiritual journey can continue as a thing for themselves alone, but as part of the one big soul of which each person has a piece. It takes many feet to trample out this vintage, as it were, but even if he dies in the struggle, he tells his mother, it won't matter. Why not? As he says,

Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there....I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there.<sup>5</sup>

There may not be much sweetness in the sorrow of that parting, but there is promise in its resolve. “Look in their eyes, Ma, and you'll see me,” as another artist, Bruce Springsteen, adds in his song which sets and updates in the present this scene, “The Ghost of Tom Joad.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the land of pure delight can only be beyond that river, or under that other sky. But surely the land we live on and the people living on it can know more joy than sorrow, more freedom than chains, more peace than violence set upon them as they're just trying to survive.

As the Epistle of James says, “For as the body without the spirit is dead, faith without works is dead also” (James 2.26). But Christ is alive – lifted up, even, ascended on high – and Christ's body is alive – it's we – which is why we don't see Him except in one another's faces, and should always be able to see Him there. Ever'where, now, too – wherever we look. The love of God is there, though we may have our work cut out if we are to make sure people are free enough to know it. If that sounds like a lot to do, that's because it is. But it's what He called us to do, and it would be unlike Him ever to stop calling. *Amen.*

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 436

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics.php?song=theghostoftomjoad>.