

ASCENSION OF OUR LORD | MAY 29, 2022

ACTS 1:1-11 | PSALM 47 | EPHESIANS 1:15-23 | LUKE 24:44-53

Marion Tinsley was the best checkers player who ever lived. At one point, he was world champion for sixteen years running. And from the time he started playing in the 1950s to the time he died in 1995, he lost a grand total of seven games.¹

Jonathan Schaeffer is not a particularly good checkers player. But he is a good computer scientist. And back in the 1990s, he tried to see just how good Tinsley actually was. Schaeffer spent years loading up an artificial intelligence program with the 500 billion potential positions a game of checkers can have. He nicknamed the program “Chinook.” And he discovered that while Tinsley was astoundingly good at checkers, he wasn’t perfect. But Chinook was.

Schaeffer “solved” checkers.² A game is solved when you can’t lose if you play perfectly. You can always win or draw. Tic-tac-toe is solved. Even as a kid, you can solve tic-tac-toe in your head. Researchers have also solved the slightly more complicated Connect Four. And after nineteen years of effort running calculations on stacks of servers, Schaeffer solved checkers.

Even if you aren’t a big checkers person, you can see the appeal of Schaeffer’s project. It’s nice to think that there is a world in which things can only get better as long as you pick the right option. We would love to live in a world that is “solved.”

That desire is part of what makes the story of the ascension is about. For the past forty days, we’ve been hearing stories about how the risen Jesus has been appearing to his disciples, showing them his wounds, breaking bread with them, and giving them the great commission to go out into the world and baptize all the nations.

If you’re the disciples, you’re thinking this is going to be great. You get to love and serve and worship and celebrate. And if anything ever gets complicated, just ask Jesus what you’re supposed to do.

But what happens after forty days? Jesus walks the disciples from Jerusalem to Bethany and ascends into heaven. In Luke’s gospel, the disciples respond by celebrating and worshipping God. As if to say *Yes! God!* I’m a little skeptical that’s what actually happened. The book of Acts gives us a more believable account. Instead of celebrating, the disciples just stare up at the sky. As if to say *Oh, God.*

Ascension is about absence. Where is Jesus? Not here. And if you’re the disciples, that’s really all that matters. You still have all that loving and serving and baptizing and to do. But now you can’t rely on Jesus to make the hard calls. You have to figure it out.

¹ Alexis C. Madrigal, “How Checkers Was Solved,” *The Atlantic*, July 19, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/07/marion-tinsley-checkers/534111/>.

² Jonathan Schaeffer et al., “Checkers Is Solved,” *Science* 317, no. 5844 (September 14, 2007): 1518–22, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1144079>.

That's the context for all the stories we've heard from the book of Acts this Easter season. Can Gentiles be a part of this community? Do they have to become Jewish first? Should we go to Europe or stay in Asia? Who can we eat with? What are we going to do about Cornelius?

This community has to figure it out. They can't just ask Jesus. There's no Chinook program that will spit out an answer to every possible scenario. There's no assistant to the bishop that can come and tell you what you should do. Jesus isn't here anymore, so you're on your own.

But stick with the stories a little longer and what you find is that the ascension of Jesus isn't about his absence but about a different kind of presence. In today's reading from Ephesians, the author talks about how the power of God raised Jesus from the dead and lifted him up into the heavens. So far, so good. But notice what else they say. God "has put all things under [Christ's] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

There are at least two things that we can take from that. The first is that God empowers us. The power that raised Jesus from death, the power that raised Jesus into the heavens, that power doesn't disappear when Jesus ascends into the heavens. That power is given to us. There's another word we use for the power that raised Jesus from death: the Holy Spirit. Jesus even says explicitly in today's gospel reading, "Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." And sure enough, the disciples do receive that power on Pentecost. And so do we.

And the second is that God trusts us. The disciples are not left with a book or a manual or a computer program. They are given the power of the Holy Spirit and sent into the world. This is why the author of Ephesians prays for the church to have a spirit of wisdom. There are times when you need to make tradeoffs and weigh competing goods, and there will be times when there just isn't a clear answer. There is no teacher's edition of the Bible that has the answers in the back of the book. The world isn't solved. And still, God sends us to go live in it and love it and serve it, even if we can't always be perfect.

That power and that trust changes how we encounter the world around us. Every once in a while, I get a note from a congregant after some terrible event happens that says something to the effect of, "Why isn't God doing something about this? Why is God absent?"

Which is a good question to ask. But whenever we ask that question, we should always be thinking about how we enact the presence of God in our communities. How is God empowering us in this situation? And what decisions does God trust us to make? If we are, as the author of Ephesians says, the "body" of Christ, then we are empowered and trusted to enact God's presence in the world around us. *What would people say about God if all they knew came from our witness as a community?*

That should change how we think about the ascension. Does the ascension mean Christ is absent? Not even close. In fact, it means the exact opposite. Because the presence of Jesus isn't bound up in this one historical figure, it now fills all of creation. How does the author of Ephesians put it? Christ fills "all in all." Jesus still moves and acts in the world today through the power of the Holy Spirit. We don't need to stare up into the sky waiting for someone else to tell us what to do. Jesus says, "Go."

The Spanish mystic Teresa of Ávila captured this beautifully when she wrote, "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

Or as we put it, *God's work, our hands*. It's not as poetic, but you can fit it on a t-shirt. It's the same idea.

The power that raised Jesus from death and into the heavens, God puts that power to work in us. The world may be impossibly complicated, but as the author of Ephesians reminds us, the power God gives us is immeasurably great. Even if the world can't be solved with the mind of God, it can be served together as the body of Christ.

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