

Jesus in the clouds (Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23)

Is there anything more embarrassing than believing in a three-story universe?

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I spent much of my college years worshiping with and working for an Episcopal church. I was drawn to the liturgy, the Eucharist, and the progressive theology. I was beginning to understand that many of my companions in the pews embraced the miracles and mysteries of Christian theology through a mythological lens. The new rector clearly set out to cultivate an expansive community where a variety of theological perspectives were welcome, though his own liberal leanings were fairly evident.

I was surprised, therefore, by his Ascension Sunday sermon. He admitted to believing in the literal ascension of Jesus. I remember him gesturing upward, his gaze drifting to the skies as if witnessing the resurrected body of Christ drifting onward and upward, finally disappearing behind a cloud.

Believing in a literal ascension required, in my mind, a significantly more comprehensive suspension of disbelief than even the resurrection. It was one thing to confess that God had the authority to restore a body to life. It was another to imagine Jesus boarding some sort of spiritual elevator. Going up. It required a return to a three-story universe, with hell below and heaven above and the world poised precariously between. The only thing more embarrassing than believing in a three-

story universe would be pitching my tent with the young-earth creationists.

On the one hand, literalism felt flattening to me. I was already, at 20 years old, beginning to develop a preference for the meaning of biblical stories over the tedious debates about whether or not they actually happened. My very first contribution to the *Century*, a lectionary post back in 2010, included an aside I still stand by: “It’s easy to get wrapped up in the whole virgin/young woman debate. But like Easter sermons that deliberate on whether the resurrection actually happened, Advent and Christmas sermons that obsess over Mary’s sexual status are painfully boring. The only two places I’ve heard people gossip about someone’s virginity are the pulpit and the high school girls’ bathroom.”

I still don’t think that pondering historicity or peddling literalism is generally the best approach to preaching on supernatural aspects of scripture. But this is what I held in my other hand: it felt comforting and thrilling to hear my reasonable, rational, theologically and socially progressive priest surrender to a childlike belief that Jesus was (meta)physically seated at the right hand of the Father. I was being given permission I didn’t know I craved—even to hope against hope that the same lift that ushered Jesus upward would one day reverse course and return the risen Savior in redemptive glory.