

In His Image



Eric Haarer

I have difficulties with the more apocalyptic readings in the New Testament. Woe to those born in that age, the weeping and gnashing of teeth, the moon turning dark, stars falling from the sky, the desolating abomination, and all that sort of thing. This richly symbolic language is too often used to defend a need for a harsh, judgmental God, one who can't wait to catch evildoers and separate the sheep from the goats, us from them. It bothers me, too, that these readings, and especially those in the book of *Revelation*, are pounced upon by every quack in Christendom looking for some esoteric knowledge, some key insight that assures their placement on the right side of the fence during the great sorting. People with martyr complexes (or victim complexes) also love these readings. Suffering guarantees them a nice condo in the New Jerusalem!

But it is not esoteric knowledge or suffering that gets us into heaven: love gets us into heaven. It is not *what* we suffer, but the quality with which we *love*, both in good times and in bad times, that leads us along the right path. In fact the easiest way to suffer less here and now is to love less. Those who do love—even when that love is flawed and misguided—know a lot about the end times because they know much about suffering. For those who have loved and lost, felt the pain of betrayal and regret, watched a loved one die, suffered some debilitating illness, or the ill consequences of their own choices, the end times are not some vague future possibility, but a present reality. Especially as we grow older, the disparate and seemingly meaningless and painful parts of our life cry out for healing, some way of integrating them into wholeness.

I have met only two people who, near the end of their lives, said they had no regrets. They both should have been locked up! For most of us, however, sorrow, pain, and regret are part of the baggage we carry with us. Unless we repress them completely, they continue to haunt and hound us, like an unwelcome relative at a family reunion demanding to be let in. And until we not just let them in, but welcome them in, we will not become whole. The problem is that this is often an impossible task for us, but never for Christ. We may be stuck in Good Friday, but that is not the last word: Easter is. Christ does for us the work of reintegration that we so often cannot do for ourselves.

We learn about and begin to experience and share with others this saving work in many ways: through the love of family and friends, through scripture and prayer, and even through the study of philosophy and theology. But much of our healing happens on a level that is not easily described rationally, and so we turn to art and poetry to illustrate and interpret the deeper workings of resurrection in our lives.

Recently we were presented with "Christ's Ascension," the painting that graces the cover of this issue of *Desert Call*, and which has a permanent home in our chapel in Crestone. It has become a personal favorite, surprisingly so given its

decidedly apocalyptic feel. It is by the impressionist painter Jeffrey Lungé, and was given to us by his widow, Eileen. Although born in London, Jeffrey spent most of his artistic career in the American southwest. He is best known for his impressionist renditions of Native American life in the high plains of northern Arizona, especially the Hopi kachina dancers, whom he painted from memory. What I love most about Jeffrey's paintings is the integration of landscape and people. A Navaho girl tending her sheep blends into the surrounding mesas; the sheep grow from the rust-red soil. A Hopi dancer emerges from and melts back into the desert. Jeffrey captures the intimacy between land and people so important in Native American culture.

This same spirit permeates "Christ's Ascension" (watercolor, 9 1/2" x 26"). The landscape is filled with southwest imagery. Mesas, the starry Arizona night, figures and forms that mirror the pictographs and petroglyphs left by indigenous cultures throughout the southwest, and the rich desert colors of yellow sandstone and ochre soil. In the midst of this landscape—by itself somewhat chaotic and disconnected, motion leading in many directions—is Christ. He is not imposed upon the landscape, but exists within it, even seeming to emerge from it. He forms the center in which the surrounding chaos is rooted, the light illuminating and uniting the Genesis-like formless wasteland.

Christ's image unifies and draws together as a whole all of the disparate images in the painting. But this is not a forced unification. Like the Navaho girl and Hopi dancer, Christ is at home in the surrounding landscape. Christ is the still figure at the center of a frenetic world, but paradoxically shares in its motion. Arms and legs bleed into the painting. Upward motion is indicated, but at the same time Christ appears to descend into the landscape rather than rise above it. There is no drawing away from the world in this ascension, but rather *incorporation*—literally bringing into one body—the surrounding images. Christ is the moving yet still point around which the elements and motion in the landscape are choreographed. It reminds me of a passage from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh
nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there
the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call
it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither move-
ment from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point,
the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the
dance. (*Burnt Norton*)

Many of Jeffrey's paintings are of dances, and it is this image of Christ's dance integrating and unifying all the unconnected elements of the painting that I find so alluring, and which speaks to my own experience. Life can seem dark and disconnected at times, like scenes from different movies strung together. Yet, with the central image of Christ, a harmony and unity exist that we could not bring about on our own.

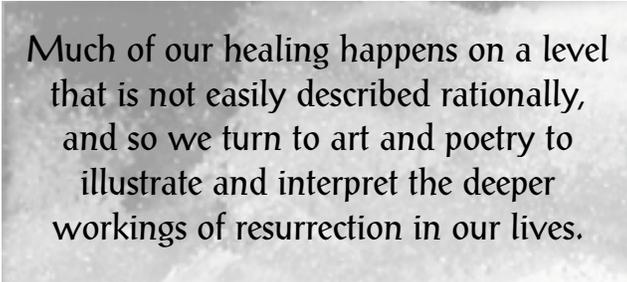
All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him, everything is held together. (Colossians 1:16b-17)

The classical Greek philosopher Aristotle described four "causes" of existence: the material, the efficient, the formal, and the final. The "material cause" is the stuff out of which we are made. The "efficient cause" is the energy, the vitality that gives us life. The "formal cause" is what makes us people and not cows. And the "final cause" is the destiny to which we are being drawn. (For example, the "final cause" of an acorn is an oak tree.)

For the Greeks the final cause was the most important and decisive cause of existence. This seems foreign to our scientific, rational minds, which tend only to see antecedent cause followed by subsequent effect. How can some future reality "cause" who we are here and now? But, when you think of it, many examples of this can be found. Desire for a future diploma "causes" us to enter college. Retirement "causes" us to save money. The prospect of winning a race "causes" us to train our bodies. The hope of a slimmer physique "causes" us to forego desserts and torture ourselves on exercise machines.

Each of these four causes is found in "Christ's Ascension." The raw elements and primordial colors of earth and sky (material); the vibrant energy that gives movement and life to the objects in the painting (efficient); the mesas, the stars, the riders, the mountains all given shape and individuality (formal), and Christ at the center uniting and drawing all things unto himself (final). And it is Christ, the final cause, who gives meaning and unity to the landscape. Without Christ our life is at best a chaotic collage; with Christ it is a painting. Our beginning causes are important: We are formed by our culture, our family, our DNA. But what makes us most *us* is not our beginning, but the end toward which we are being drawn.

In the lower-right quarter of the painting is a small stylized image of a man on a horse. It's a dark and mysterious form, reminiscent of figures found in Native American rock art, galloping away from Christ, hurrying to get out of the picture. Although difficult to see, it is clear that Christ's gaze is directed towards this figure. And Christ's left arm, which is melting into the picture and becoming part of the landscape, is angled in such a way one would imagine Christ's hand intersecting the fleeing rider just off the canvas. I love this im-



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agery. We each have dark aspects of our own landscape we would just as soon escape from the picture of our life. The bad choices that cannot be unmade, the cruel words that cannot be unsaid, tragedies and broken hearts, memories of such pain that we hide them from others, and even from ourselves. The message of Christ reaching out for the fleeing rider in this painting is that nothing exists in our lives—no memory, no mistake, no wrong path, no suffering—that cannot be embraced by Christ and form part of a beautiful, unified whole. The message of Christ’s resurrection is that we have nothing to fear, nothing to hide, that there is nothing about us, or in us, that cannot be incorporated and brought back into the whole body.

In this sense, Lungé’s painting reminds me of Rembrandt’s “Prodigal Son.” In that work, too, we have a God who is all embracing. The errant son returns broken, in tattered clothes, and is embraced by the father. All of the son’s mistakes, his flaws and wounds, and the consequences of his self-centered actions are drawn into the father’s arms, and the son is re-incorporated into the family that forms the center of his true self. Nothing is left out—nothing left unredeemed—of this all embracing love. The wounds and the pain are not erased, but re-incorporated, and the redeemed, returned son is more beautiful, more whole, than the one who left unscathed those years before.

The purpose of all our journeying is to return home as for the first time. (T.S. Eliot)

The Pharisees, attempting to trick Jesus, once asked him whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Christ’s response: “Show me a coin.” He then asks them whose image is on the coin. “Caesar’s,” they say. He replies, “Then pay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” The implication was clear: because the coin bore Caesar’s image, he had the right to claim it. But who bears God’s image? Upon what currency may God lay claim? The reference to Genesis 1:27 is obvious: “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.”

Christ is the image of the invisible God, but we, too, bear the divine image within. But that image becomes obscured, at least to ourselves, in the pain and complexity of life. Our self-centered choices paradoxically lead us away from the center of our self. And, like Dante “lost in a dark wood,” we cannot find our way home. The accumulation of wounds, self-inflicted and otherwise, can lead us to become split off from our very selves. How often we ask: “Who am I?” “How could I have done that?” “How could I have said that?” “I just wasn’t myself.” “I don’t know who I am anymore.” How often does some tragedy, some suffering, shake the foundation of our faith, and of who we think we are?

Reuniting the disparate elements of ourselves so that God’s image shines through once again is the work of the resurrection. When Christ died, he died for us, and as us. And he was raised for us, and as us. This intimate union of our selves with Christ’s self lies at the heart of our faith. But that doesn’t make it easy to understand. Christ becomes us, and we become Christ. Paul struggled mightily with this reality and we see it in his many references to “Christ in me” and “I in Christ.” Perhaps the most memorable articulation of this mystery is in Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ, yet I live, no longer I but Christ lives in me” (2:20). Our true image, who we really are, is effected by our union with Christ. But we fear this. We fear the loss of our individuality through absorption into Christ. But this fear is groundless and misses the point. The more united we become with Christ, the more individuated we are. It’s like in a good,





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long-standing marriage. If the relationship is healthy, the partners become more themselves the deeper their union in love becomes. Intimacy breeds individuality.

And so Jeffrey's painting represents not only the Christ who draws all things unto himself, but it is also our own self-portrait. Christ is not imposed upon the landscape of our lives, but lives within it. Christ is not someone external to us, but the deepest center of who we are. Distinct, yet not separate, Christ is the center that unites, binds, and incorporates all of the disparate elements of our lives into one unique, unrepeatable, and beautiful work of art. That is our end, the destiny that causes us. "Christ's Ascension" is a picture of the end times, of the apocalypse. But that word literally means "to uncover." All of the elements of the landscape of our lives are uncovered, exposed, in the light of Christ. Not for judgment, but for incorporation. We begin in the image of God, and we are meant to end by having that image recreated in a more beautiful way than ever before. But I think T.S. Eliot says it better:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album).
Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.
Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning. (*Four Quartets: East Coker*)

When we recognize in "Christ's Ascension" not just an image of Christ, but a self-portrait with Christ residing at the center of our very self, then we must come to grips with the

realization that we, too, share in the responsibility of Christ's work of healing the fragmentation in the world, especially in the lives of those we have been given to live with and called to love. When we read the gospels, and also the works of Paul, it is clear that we are meant to carry on the work of Christ. At the Last Supper, in preparation for the meal, Jesus doffed his outer garment, tied a towel around his waist, and began to wash the feet of his disciples. In this profoundly symbolic gesture he embraced the dirtiest part of his disciples' bodies, took them to his breast, and washed them. To complete the gesture he shares with them the bread and wine with the words "this is my body...this is my blood." In these acts he symbolically takes upon himself the role of a servant who is not afraid to get his hands dirty by taking to himself, embracing and cleansing, the less savory aspect of our selves and incorporating them into his own body. He even does this for Judas in a final effort to save one he loves. His final words to his friends: "Go and do likewise."

I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. (John 13:15)

Our modern world breeds fragmentation. We are a highly mobile culture. Few of us live in the same community in which we were raised; indeed few are raised in a single community. People not only change jobs, but professions repeatedly in their lives. We worship with one set of friends, work with another, and chances are live with neither. The "nuclear family" is disappearing as marriages, and families, are created, dissolved, and merged with dizzying complexity. These things, as well as the wounds we all suffer merely by living and loving, leave us with the impression of a life out-of-joint, a story without a plot, or a painting without a theme. And yet none of these is, ultimately, an impediment to wholeness. But it is work. And it is this work, Christ's work, of reincorporation to which we are called. When we have experienced in ourselves something of the healing and reintegration that comes from simply being loved in our entirety—dark as well as light—we want to share that with others. Having had those dark aspects of our selves uncovered (Greek: *apo-calyptein*), accepted, and loved back into the landscape of our lives, we will not shy away from doing so for others. Nothing will shock us or dismay us, for in the end we know the painting will be beautiful.



Eric Haarer lives at Nada Hermitage in Crestone, Colorado.

"Christ's Ascension" Reproductions



1/2 size reproduction on high-quality photographic paper. Suitable for framing. (image: 4.75"x13")

We are proud to be able to offer reproductions of Jeffrey Lungé's watercolor "Christ's Ascension." We believe this work of art, which has inspired so many worshipers in our chapel at Nada, will also inspire you, and uplift your soul.

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Beauty and friendship go hand-in-hand. They are both treasured gifts. In the autumn of 2006 we Nadans had the privilege of spending some time with good friends in Sedona, where we had our first foundation. There, Eileen Lungé, one of those treasured friends (standing to the right of the painting), presented us with her late husband Jeffrey's watercolor "Christ's Ascension." The next day we celebrated a memorial mass for Eileen's sister, Jessica, her brother-in-law, Ned, and husband, Jeffrey. Ned and Jessica Danson had been dear friends of ours for many years, and their recent passing was like losing members of one's family. Attending were Ned and Jessica's daughter, Jan, her husband, Loren, and son, Eric, all of whom have become over the years very dear friends as well. We had the mass outside in the Danson's garden, among the roses Ned and Jessica loved so well. Beside the altar stood Jeffrey's painting, and on the altar was a Hopi stole given to me by Ned and Jessica for my ordination. Although it was a memorial mass it was a celebration of the beauty of life. The beauty of lives well lived, the beauty of friends, the beauty of nature, and the beauty of art. Fyodor Dostoevsky declared that "beauty will save the world." Certainly that day, among those dear friends living and dead, we experienced that salvation.

Eric