

“OUTTA SIGHT”

7 Easter
John D. Lane

Acts 1:9
Emmanuel Church

28 May 2017
Staunton VA

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

My homiletics professor was Edmund Steimle. He was good. He was memorable. He was brutal. For years, including long after his death, I had nightmares on Saturday nights. In them, Steimle would be unexpectedly sitting in the front row when I got up to preach a mediocre, ill-prepared sermon. I always woke up in a terrified sweat.

One of Steimle’s oft-repeated commands was the following: A sermon should be 20% then–Bible, the life of Jesus, what kind of rock Moses hit which produced water, that kind of thing–and 80% now–what’s going on today, what affects the people in the pews, events and descriptions with which they can readily identify. At Virginia Seminary, for years someone taught a course called “The Bible and the New York Times.” Steimle would have liked that–if the New York Times had gotten 80% of the attention.

The Ascension is one of my favorite church feasts, mostly because it leads so naturally from what happened in ancient times and faraway lands to what is happening in our lives right here. I am eager to tackle the Ascension. Or as a late colleague of mine put it, “Pick a text and depart from it.”

The Ascension marks the end of the ministry of the visibly present Jesus. At least some of his followers have been with him for 3 years. He has healed. He has taught. He has debated with other religious leaders. He has sat around the campfire, so to speak, with his closest disciples, dealing with their faith, their doubts, their questions. He has sent them out two by two into every village with instructions on what to do and what to say. They come back. Jesus himself debriefs them.

Then suddenly after a moving evening meal, he has been arrested, taken away, tried, and executed—all within less than a day's time. After a brief time of despondency and grief, he returns periodically. Things may be different from before, but they are still good. Then comes the Ascension and he suddenly disappears from their sight. They are confused, baffled, leaderless, depressed. That's more Bible and more than Professor Steimle would like, so I'll move quickly on to the here and now—in case he's in one of the back pews.

Late Tuesday night, Shelby and Steve became grandparents when their daughter Emily gave birth to Timothy. As those of us who are parents know, the birth of a child changes your life forever.

42 years ago, Bizzy was pregnant with her/our first child, and I was on the verge of unemployment—but that's another story. We read books. We gathered up our pillows and my pride, and traipsed off to Lamaze classes. I was to be The Coach at the birth, when Bizzy was perhaps (if we didn't get things right) to experience “some discomfort.” Either this time or during a succeeding pregnancy, I read about Dr. LeBouyer in France who recommended having babies born underwater. It was sort of like having the baby in the rice field with Jacques Cousteau cutting the umbilical chord.

I think it was her next pregnancy when we were required to listen to a lecture by an obstetrician named something like Dr. Arragoni, which I think in English translates to “arrogant.” He spent an hour—seemed more like 24—telling us he was the Thomas Edison of obstetrics, having invented every enlightened technique ever devised since the time of the cavewoman. In the field of obstetrics, it was clear he thought he was well, HUGE! On finally exiting, I told Bizzy I would never listen to another word from that jerk for the rest of my life. You might say I had negative thoughts.

We did pretty much everything we were told—relaxation exercises, breathing techniques, building our team approach, talking to other couples, and all that. Then I got another job, and a month before the birth we moved to New Orleans, where the only two people we knew there had set up an appointment with the head of the department at Ochsner Clinic. Dr. Holland was willing to “consider” having me present in the delivery room.

New Orleans was apparently behind Charlotte in its medical practices, which is probably why Dr. Arragoni was later to become so important—a legend in his own mind!

In recent times however, things seem reversed. North Carolina passed the bathroom bill, and New Orleans took down the statue of Robert E. Lee from its place of prominence in a city which is 60% African-American—but I certainly digress. Back to birthin' babies.

We went to a clergy party on a Friday night. When we got home, Bizzy told me she thought she was in labor. I don't think I actually shut my eyes that night. Before the 4:15am birth another day later of our dear Edward, Bizzy had been in labor for 27 hours, a test of our Lamaze training, which I at least had already failed. As the boxer and philosopher Mike Tyson put it, "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." We got punched in the mouth.

The hospital staff, even the Lamaze-reluctant obstetrician, were very nice. Edward looked great. Having started some months earlier going through—I'm not kidding—40,000 names for both boys and girls—we settled on Edward David before the authorities came to get us. Everything seemed great. Until ...

They told us we were free to take the baby home. "Do we have to?" was the thought hitting both of us at the same time. Like the disciples on Ascension, we had a whole lot of anxiety about this next chapter. Have you ever felt unprepared? Ten days later, so the story goes, along comes Pentecost. Be sure to wear RED next week.

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