May 30, Ascension (Luke 24:44-53)

It can be excruciating to long for something just out of reach.

by Teri McDowell Ott in the May 22, 2019 issue

I'm not surprised Jesus has to "open the minds" of the disciples before his ascension, because my mind needs to be opened, too. This text has always felt hokey to me. Artists portray Jesus soaring into heaven, Superman-style, his arms outstretched in blessing and his feet pointed like a dancer's. Some just show his feet dangling from the heavens, the last of his flesh to grace this world, with the disciples left reaching for a big toe. I prefer the version Luke tells in Acts, where the disciples are caught staring after Jesus—long enough for it to get awkward—until two men in white robes tell them to stop. That'd be me, staring after Jesus, asking myself, *OK, where's the metaphor here?*

It's not that I am without faith, just that my educated, Presbyterian brain quickly seeks to rationalize the text—a text clearly meant to lead us toward religious imagination and wonder. The future of Jesus' mission and ministry depend on the disciples' minds being opened. He can't leave until their imagination is stoked and their minds opened to the impossible possibilities he represents—a world shaped by repentance, forgiveness, and love; an incarnational God who lives and breathes, dies and rises.

At a recent conference of college chaplains, a colleague coyly asked, "OK, who's your spiritual boyfriend or girlfriend?" I confessed that mine is Christian Wiman. The poet, who describes himself as someone who is both "confused and certain about the source of life and consciousness," has come to mean a great deal to me. In the preface to his book *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, Wiman writes that as he set out to answer the question of what he believes, he came to realize "that the real question—the real difficulty—is how, not what. How do you answer that burn of being? What might it mean for your life—and your death—to acknowledge that insistent, persistent ghost?"

Wiman never denies the existence of God, but he wrestles honestly with how God is to be imagined. When he quotes Nietzsche—“When you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you”—I hear a soft critique of all the pat ways we have tried to capture God, reducing God to something much smaller than a gaping abyss. Wiman speaks of God as more a sense of absence than of presence, more a longing-for than a finding and capturing and making-sense-of.

His language for God feels truer than what I experience elsewhere, especially in the church. Our Presbyterian ordination vows include a promise to serve with “energy, intelligence, imagination and love.” Yet often when I fill in as a preacher, I know that the energy I had that week to put into my sermon will barely graze the need of the long faces in front of me. Or I sit in my pew as a mother of two children, disappointed in myself because I yelled at my son that morning to put on a clean pair of pants. In such moments, Theodore Roethke’s poem “Dolor” sometimes comes to mind: “I have seen dust from the walls of institutions / . . . more dangerous than silica / . . . Glazing . . . the duplicate gray standard faces.”

I pray for us to have more religious imagination—to ward off Roethke’s dangerous dust by opening our minds to awe. To wonder about what or who might be present in the absence, to stir the sanctuary air with the bodies gathered—transparent in our need, honest in our doubt, reaching toward one another and God and those outside the church walls with energy to love as Jesus called us to love.

In his essay “Love Bade Me Welcome,” Wiman writes about receiving his diagnosis of incurable cancer on his 39th birthday. He’d been married less than a year. The news eventually led Wiman and his wife back to church, an hour a week that he describes as both “excruciating, in that it seemed to tear all wounds wide open,” and “profoundly comforting, in that it seemed to offer the only possible balm.” After church they would walk the streets of Chicago. Wiman writes that he remembers

> less the specifics of the conversations we had about God, always about God, than the moments of silent, and what felt like sacred, attentiveness those conversations led to: an iron sky and the lake so calm it seemed thickened; the El blasting past with its rain of sparks and brief, lost faces; the broad leaves and white blooms of a catalpa on our street, Grace Street, and under the tree a seethe of something that was just barely still a bird, quick with life beyond its own.

The ascension event stretches us, like those images of the disciples reaching for a heaven-bound Jesus. It’s uncomfortable, even excruciating, to long for something just out of reach, to graze a toe but never catch hold of that which you hope and believe will make everything right. But perhaps this stretched posture and painstaking effort are what is required if our fingertips are ever to graze the reality of the living Christ.

With their minds open, Jesus’ disciples turn from the ascension event and back toward their life together and their ministry. I’m struck by the immediacy with which they respond. They are energized. They worship. They return to Jerusalem with great joy. The living Christ is now far out of reach, but they are ready to stretch, to question and doubt, to learn and discover, to attend and love. They are ready to fall silent before a mysterious, unfathomable ghost of a God—an abyss—in awe and wonder.