

1) Robert Kolb on Why Luther Matters Today (A Reading Tip).

2) Christ and “The Cloud”

Colleagues,

Two items this week. First—

Pr. Martin Yee, Assistant to the Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Singapore and a good friend of Crossings, administers and maintains at least three closed Facebook groups that focus on confessional Lutheran theology. He does this work with uncommon zeal. Not a day goes by without a string of fresh posts popping up in my feed. Often they carry links to items well worth perusing that I would otherwise miss. Here’s a teaser from one I caught some days ago—

“In an age in which many mean it when they say, ‘I wish I were dead,’ we are able to say, ‘I have just the thing for you,’ and fit them with the death of the old identity and the garment of resurrection in Christ.”

The words are Robert Kolb’s. They come from an essay entitled “Luther’s Truths Then and Now,” delivered a year ago at an LCMS-sponsored conference in Wittenberg, Germany. I commend it happily to the rest of you, especially my fellow ELCA readers who would not be likely to stumble across it otherwise. Satan has long since seduced God’s American Lutherans into skulking on their respective sides of the barriers they’ve built between each other. There we take it as axiomatic that the sorry creatures on the other side are slaves of theological dreck. Perhaps it requires a Singaporean’s eye to spot how shafts of wholesome substance keep shooting up amid the dreck, and not on

one side only, but on both. In the present case, there's not a thoughtful Lutheran in the land who won't benefit from Dr. Kolb's rehearsal of Luther's core insights. Better still are his observations on how useful and necessary those insights are for the 21st century world. The essay is long. This means merely that you'll be well fed by the time you're done reading.

For those to whom the name is new, Robert Kolb is a Professor Emeritus at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. More to the point, he's a Reformation scholar with an international reputation. He's also co-editor, with Timothy J. Wengert, of the definitive English translation of the Book of Concord. He has spoken at least twice at Crossings conferences, where his graciousness has been every bit as refreshing as the substance of his papers.

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Item two—

You'll have noticed that you're getting this post two days after its putative date—and it didn't surprise you. Thursday Theology arriving on a Saturday is not all that unusual of late. In keeping with my sinner's addiction to such things, I plead the excuse this time that Thursday was busy. Where I spend my days, we celebrated our Lord's ascension twice. The assembly in the morning was comprised overwhelmingly of the students in our parish school. I got things started there by noting that this was a special day—the school's weekly chapel service usually happens on Wednesday. Then the question: "Can someone tell me what the name of this day is?" Up shot the hand of the eager kindergartner. "Cinco de Mayo." I should have expected that. We chuckled and appreciated the little one's obvious pride in knowing what's what. Then we went on to revel in the Gospel.

And Gospel it is, this great Ascension Day account of Christ's present location (so to speak), and with it the promise of what

this means for us all. St. Paul makes wondrous hay with both the account and the promise in the opening chapters of Ephesians, and elsewhere too. Not that many seem to notice it these days, preachers and teachers of the flock included. As I put it in a sermon some 25 years ago, we seem to think of the 40th day after Easter as a time not to celebrate the Ascension, but to mourn the Evaporation. No wonder the saints skip church in droves when the day rolls around.

In my digs this year, the numbers at the evening service were artificially bolstered by a choir director's prescience in scheduling her middle school choir for a contribution. That brought lots of parents along. Many, I'm guessing, were at an Ascension service for the first time ever. Anticipating this as I assembled the evening's bout of preaching, I caught myself groping harder than usual for a fresh way or two to make the good news obvious. At some point in the pondering the eye got snagged on Luke's mention of "a cloud," and how it "took them out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). Then it dawned, how "the cloud" means something more to eighth graders in 2016 than it did to their counterparts of ten or even five years ago, and how, with that new meaning, comes a chance to gush with Gospel. So I pounced.

For the core of what came out, see below. I pass it along on the chance that others might find it useful down the road. If any have long since beaten me to the thought, I'd love to hear from you.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

On Christ and the "Cloud"—

(as heard at a church in Cleveland, Ohio

on Ascension Day, 2016)

So tonight, this Lord Christ, risen and ascended, is able once again to look each of you in the eye, and to call you each by name. In doing that he deals with your sins and failures, not by punishing them but by forgiving them; not by holding them against you but by getting rid of them. You might say that he erases them from your resume, and he gets away with that because, after all, he's in charge. The bean-counters are not.

And when he tells you tonight, as he already has, that your sins are forgiven, he wants you to know and trust that what you've done or failed to do is a non-issue, at least where God is concerned.

Now this is not the way the old world works. Ask any seventh or eighth grader who worries about the grades she gets. Ask the parent of any seventh or eighth grader who nags her child about his grades. In the old world, the one all of us were born into, every person has his or her own track record. I should underscore with the students here that this is as true of an old pastor as it is of a middle school scholar. What we do or fail to do gets written down and recorded, if not on paper then in memories; if not the memories up here, in people's heads, then the memories of all those computers that constitute what these days they call "the cloud." And in that cloud it lurks and lodges as something that somebody can always hold against you, or use against you. That's why your parents also keep nagging you not just about your grades, but even more about being careful, so very careful, when it comes to posting things on social media.

Beware the cloud. It's a tool, a creature of the old world, and it operates by old world rules. It also helps to enforce those

rules.

And here's the thing: when all the memories have been recorded and read, when all the rules have been enforced, we all wind up losers, every one of us. And even worse, we all wind up dead.

But that, you see, is one huge reason for tonight's great excitement. Once again we're hearing how there is somebody behind the cloud, somebody above the cloud, somebody so strong, so kind, so incredibly generous and good that he's able to defy the cloud, and he's perfectly ready to ignore the cloud. Better still, for the sake of everybody here—for the sake of people the world over tonight—he's busy overruling the cloud.

In tonight's great picture, the Lord Jesus is sitting at God the Father's right hand, where he's busy whispering in God the Father's right ear.

What he says is this: the only memory that matters is the memory of that dark, that terrible day, when I hung on the cross for them. In the same way, the only record that counts any longer is my record: this great accounting of my deeds, my accomplishments, my faithfulness; this record that all the saints and angels around this throne keep rehearsing in all its wonderful and incredible detail, all of it done, and lived and suffered to give us—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—all the reason we need to make these creatures new, and good, and perfect, and true, and at last to bring them home.

And even as the Lord Jesus says this, the Father sits there nodding his head in absolute agreement. That's the picture we get to see on this wonderful Ascension night.

Behind the cloud—that dark and ominous cloud, so full of threat and woe—behind it shines the light of Christ, and in that light is life for everybody in this room tonight. New life. Life that

runs on the Jesus-only rule. Because of him you get to live. Because of him, your sins are forgotten. Because of him there is nothing, but nothing, that will keep the love of God from having its way with you.

Or to put that another way, because of Jesus risen and ascended, you and I are looking through the cloud tonight at the best future ever.

Thanks be to God!