

11-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Probst, Joachim W. (1990) "Of potatoes and Ascension," *Consensus*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol16/iss2/9>

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Of Potatoes and Ascension

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, let me paraphrase St. Paul and offer his prayer for the church at Ephesus as if it were spoken for the faithful souls of Faith Lutheran here in East Hamilton:

“May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe.”

It was Ascension Day at First Lutheran Church.

Most of the young folk had jobs of course,
and it wasn't considered a holiday
so only a handful of the faithful
had shown up for worship.

Harvey Jacobsen was there of course.

He hadn't missed Ascension Day worship in some 32 years.
It was kind of a tradition with his folk
and he'd kept the faith.

Up there in the Georgian Bay region
it was customary to go to church in the morning
and then plant your potatoes immediately
following the service... that same afternoon.
Harvey didn't know how this bit of folklore
got started, but he'd been doing it
as long as he could remember.

Pastor Steinbach gave a good sermon that morning

quoting passages of Scripture from Luke and Acts as he retold the story of our Lord's departure from this realm to the next...

The presence of God descended like a cloud and Jesus ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us, and to sit in majesty at the right hand of God.

Before he left he gave his disciples a solemn command to preach the Word to the ends of the earth and promised never to leave their side.

They would be clothed from on high in the power of the Holy Spirit.

"Lo, I am with you always to the close of the age."

Passages from Revelation made this presence seem all the more magnificent.

Jesus Christ exalted in splendour walking in the midst of his churches, worthy to break the seals, ready to redeem all of creation.

A new heaven and a new earth:
That's what he promised.

And he would come again
just as he had left.

He would come again
and restore the creation unto himself.

Harvey loved to hear the story
because he knew Jesus was real... and a faithful friend.

One time he was driving down Highway 10
when the front tire blew.

He could remember how scared he was
and how he'd said the Lord's Prayer almost twice over
before the pickup came to rest on the soft shoulder.

He'd stepped out of the truck to have a look
and felt something like a warm glow down his back
and a still small voice saying, "Do not be afraid."

He knew the Lord was a living and a very present help
in times of trouble....

He never left home without making the sign of the cross.

Harvey loved to come to church and just rest. Sometimes he didn't even understand the sermon, but he knew he was understood and that's all that mattered.

He was a bit embarrassed when he found himself drifting into thoughts about the afternoon. He wondered whether it would rain. He'd have to get those potatoes in the ground somehow. Walking up for communion Harvey noticed how the rows of pews looked like furrows in a field... ready for planting.

A verse from Pastor Steinbach's sermon came to mind: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit." He thought of our Lord's death and resurrection and when the cup was passed to him he received it with deep satisfaction and gratitude.

Our Lord can be wherever he wants to be. He can even come to me in this little sip of wine and a tiny bit of bread.

Leaving church that morning Harvey gave the pastor a warm handshake and said, "I was fed, Pastor. Thanks." Pastor Steinbach smiled.

"So... Are you gonna plant your potatoes today, Harvey?" "You bet, Pastor. Tradition and all that."

After lunch Harvey grabbed his spade and a 50 pound sack of seed potatoes and headed for the field.

Working up a good sweat he remembered what his daddy had told him a few years back about how this tradition of planting potatoes on Ascension Day had got started.

The Lord Jesus was lifted up from the earth and he had promised that when he was lifted up he would draw all people unto himself.

Now a good seed potato can be cut up into several pieces;

As long as one or two good eyes are turned up
a piece will produce a strong plant.

The Lord of Heaven and Earth being lifted up
would draw life unto himself.

That was sort of the gist of it.

Harvey wondered how it really got started.

The ground was a bit damp.

And mud was caked to his boots

'til they were beginning to look like potatoes too....

But just as he was bending over to push yet another
spud into the earth... he felt a sharp pain in his side.

His whole chest felt like something very heavy
had been loaded upon it

and he had trouble catching his breath for pain...

the pain shot down his arm and into one of his legs.

He slumped over onto the damp earth

his eyes turned to the sky

and he thought he was about to die.

Now he'd heard that these symptoms
were signs of a heart attack.

And bad hearts ran in his whole family.

Harvey closed his eyes and began to pray:

"Lord God of heaven and earth...

listen to my cry...

Here I am plantin' potatoes hopin' you'd

help them grow... and I fall down in a heap myself.

My eyes are turned toward you O Lord...

lift me up if I am worthy of your name.

I'm ready Lord...

If that's you knocking on my door

it's open, Jesus... take me home."

Harvey couldn't remember how long he lay there.

An hour maybe... half an hour?

But he seemed to hear the voice of Jesus say:

"It is not for you to know times or seasons

which the Father has fixed by his own authority...

"You shall be my witness Harvey...

"Lo I am with you always."

The pain subsided almost as quickly as it had come.
Harvey got up from the ground slowly... carefully...
wondering how it was that he was still living.

He looked back at the row of potatoes he'd planted
and then looked back towards the house.

"I guess you're not ready for me yet Lord.

"Kinda like heapin' up the potatoes with mounds
to strengthen the root and bring forth a better crop."

Harvey knew he was getting another chance.

He was in the tender care of the Master of the Garden.

The Lord was preparing him for a better harvest.

He was planted just like one of those seed potatoes.

Eyes up... being drawn towards the warmth of the master.

Harvey returned home late that afternoon
very quiet... very human... very much alive.

The Lord Jesus had redeemed him again
and he felt so very thankful just to be alive.

But more than that...

he was grateful to God for the message of salvation
and that it was still being proclaimed
by a living Lord who was drawing him unto himself
at every turn of the spade
every moment.

This Jesus who ascended into heaven
was truly the Lord of all creation...

from potatoes right on down the line to himself.

Harvey thought he'd give Pastor Steinbach a call
and tell him what happened that afternoon...

but when he did, all he could say was:

"The seeds are sown Pastor... all of them....

I've got you and the Mrs. in my prayers.

Oh... and I look forward to seeing you on Sunday."

Let us pray:

*Worthy are you our Lord and God
to receive glory and honor and power
for you did create all things
and by your will they existed and were created.
Lord Jesus Christ... you have called us*

to be witnesses of these things.

*And, when I witness your power in the Word,
when I witness your love in the Sacraments,
when I witness your mighty acts in Scripture,
when I witness healings and miracles,
when I witness your comfort and support...*

*... I am convinced that witnessing,
like loving, becomes an activity of mine
because You have shown your face first.*

*When I witness your love for me,
I want others to witness you too.*

*I want to pass on what has been given to me
by your gracious hand.*

*We have seen your majesty
clothed in human flesh.*

We have beheld your glory in disguise.

*Lord open our hearts and minds
to receive you always with thanksgiving,
that we might truly become witnesses
who joyfully
and freely
share your power.*

In Jesus' precious name. Amen.