Resurrection Faith: An Inquiry into the Meaning of Presence and Absence
Professor Julianne Cox

Life is like a File Cabinet: Be Yourself!
Dr. Craig W. Ellison

TRUSTING IN HIM
Samuel Lee

TRUSTING HIS GRACE
Moses Wu

DEDICATION CAMP
Alumni Update
New Courses

RESURRECTION FAITH: AN INQUIRY INTO THE MEANING OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE
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The cornerstone of our Christian faith can be summed up in one simple, yet provocative Christological proclamation, “I am the resurrection and the life. The person who believes in me, even though he or she should die, that person will live; and every person who lives and believes in me will never (by any means) die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26). This belief is so essential to Christian identity that the Apostle Paul states emphatically, “If the resurrection of the dead is not a reality, then not even Christ has been raised up; accordingly, there is no basis to our
proclamation, there is additionally no basis for your faith,” (1 Cor. 15:13-14). For Christians, the stakes could not be higher, calling into question not only the veracity of God Himself, but also the reliability of Jesus’ words at one of the most vulnerable moments of human existence—the death of a loved one. In this one moment, faith tests the meaning of absence.

There are several reasons why my thoughts turn toward resurrection faith. The Easter season with its special music and sunrise services invites all believers to recall as a community God’s compassion through the passion and vindication of his Son, Jesus Christ: “But God shows how much he loves us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us,” (Rom. 5:8). No one can hear those fateful words “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Without identifying with the crowd’s murderous intent, yet with each celebration participants reaffirm publically personal confidence that death was not the final word. Indeed, Paul was so persuaded of this truth that his theology of the cross was deepened, “What then shall we say? If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). These powerful words mark Easter as the holiest day in the Christian calendar, for resurrection faith has enabled believers throughout the centuries to shape their lives and actions according to the sacrificial example of their Savior.

This brings me, however, to a more personal reason for a deeper consideration of our faith proclamation, the recent loss of my niece Christine. Not long ago I looked into the questioning eyes of my sister’s family and three young children gathered together to say goodbye to a beloved daughter and mother. Cancer had left Christine’s body so broken that death was considered a blessing, though her family would have gratefully cared for her longer. In their faces I recalled the weeks spent discussing God, forgiveness, the cross, and hope. Each knew of her anxiety about what would happen after she died, but none knew my own struggle to articulate to someone so frightened of death what I have spent my entire adult life proclaiming and teaching. “Do you believe this?” The situation had been exacerbated by one visiting pastor whose only response to Christine’s fearful inquiries was, “Everyone is frightened” and “No one knows what happens after death.” Needless to say, the conversations Christine and I had were extraordinarily candid. Since her death, I have thought about the faith used to confront that which taunts humanity with the unthinkable—a silent universe. What follows is my own journey beyond the limits of the human condition to embrace the provision of divine Presence.

We may think that part of the difficulty is postmodernity and the rejection of inherited truth. While this current trend has its challenges, the tension between faith and sight is as old as the original
Gospel accounts. Take for example the commissioning of the disciples in Matthew 28:16-20. When the disciples go to meet Jesus at a designated mountain they fall down before the resurrected Christ in an act of spontaneous worship; yet, the very next statement attests that some who worshipped actually doubted, providing no further comment about their uncertainties. From a different perspective, Luke 24:13-35 describes a scene on the road to Emmaus wherein two disciples recount a theologically correct, albeit incomplete assessment of the passion to an unrecognizable resurrected Jesus, ending with incredulity at the women’s suggestion of Jesus’ resurrection. If the earliest Markan manuscripts are correct and the resurrection account ends in tension between the angel’s announcement and the women’s fearful silence (Mark 16:5-8), the reader is left to ponder his or her own response. And finally, the emphatic words of a skeptical Thomas remind us of how fragile human understanding is when one is asked to believe in that which defies comprehension: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and place my hand in his side, I will certainly not believe,” (John 20:25).

Each of these evangelists confronts the challenge created by Jesus’ resurrection with striking realism, recognizing the limits of human experiential knowledge. All the same, each rejects the finality of doubt because of one simple truth, Jesus is alive: the Great Commission is given to all, even the doubters, with the attendant promise of divine presence (Matt. 28:19-20); recognition of the risen Christ is granted through communion with him, confirmed by Scripture (Luke 21:29-32); human fear did not silence the resurrection message as evidenced by the existence of Mark’s gospel and assurance that the good news will be preached to all nations (Mark 13:10); and Jesus’ final words to Thomas attest to the fullness accorded faith: “Have you believed because you have seen..."
me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” (John 20:29). How does one move from dependence on sight to faith, from the all too human angst over absence to gratitude for God’s generous gift of divine presence? I have come to understand that the answer to this question lies with the relational nature and life-giving initiative of God Himself.

The Gospel of John provides one of the most captivating presentations of the Christ event in which the pre-existent Word overcomes the distance of divine Otherness by taking on flesh and stepping into human time and space (John 1:14). Quite remarkable is the evangelist’s statement that Jesus dwelt among “us” analogous to the promise of divine presence accompanying the Israelites in the wilderness. This theme “God with us” defines the people of God wherever it is found in the Scriptures (e.g. Deut. 2:7; 31:6; Isa. 41:10; and Jer. 42:11). This “dwelling-with-us” metaphor is contingent on the empowerment of those who receive the Word to become children of God (1:12-13). In what way then is “God with us”? The evangelist presents a programmatic account of discipleship that challenges the reader to consider the significance of encounter with Jesus.

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon (John 1:35-39).

This little story is often overlooked because of its differences in comparison to the testimony of Matthew and Mark in which Jesus takes the initiative to call his disciples, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people” (Mark 1:17; par. Matt. 4:19) and the disciples do not hesitate to comply (Mark 1:18;
Focus is on the authority of the divine call, which came during performance of the disciple’s daily tasks, eliciting unqualified commitment. John’s account, however, presents a complementary perspective shaped by two questions every disciple of Jesus must ponder: “What do you seek?”, and “Where do you dwell?”

In Scripture, questions function to engage the readers in active deliberation of the issue placed before them. John the Baptist has just identified Jesus as lamb belonging to and originating from God. It is quite natural to connect the imagery to the paschal lamb. If this association is correct, then it appears the evangelist intends for the readers to reflect on the connection between Jesus’ sacrifice and the expectation inherent in the seeking of the first question. As to the significance of the sacrifice, we will learn later that Jesus is not only lamb, but shepherd who lays down his life for the sake of his sheep (10:15-18). Then in a beautiful reenactment of the self-emptying of the preexistent Christ in 13:1-15 (cf. Phil. 2:5-11), Jesus prepares his disciples for his death identifying it as a laying aside of his outer robe and a taking up of it again. In light of this perspective, the questions “What do you seek?” and “Where do you dwell?” take on greater theological significance.

I have thought deeply about Jesus’ first question and have risked asking, ‘What am I looking for from Jesus right now at this very moment? What do any of us seek when we stand face to face with a God who has given so much on our behalf?’ It has surprised me that the answer changes with the vicissitudes of life. I have not only found myself in need of forgiveness, courage, compassion and wisdom, to name a few, but have found the deepest yearnings of my soul met when I bring them to the Lamb of God. The ability to articulate specifically what we seek from our Lord provides clarity. It enables us to see the ways “God-is-with-us.” The result is a life characterized by gratitude for the countless ways each of us is shaped by hope because we choose to begin and end our search with God. It is with this insight that the request of John’s disciples is all the more unexpected and all the more provocative, “Where do you dwell?”

The simplicity of the second question belies its significance. Where does our Lord reside? No thinking person can look around our world today and not wonder where in all of this is God? Here was a question Christine desperately wanted answered, not out of anger or resentment, but in a search for understanding and acceptance. In the Johannine Gospel, Jesus is first presented as tabernacle Presence amidst the wandering people of God. He himself was destined to return to the Father (13:1), a return that was an occasion for joy (14:28) in part because it marks the indwelling of the Spirit: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you,” (14:16-17). Rather than leave his own orphaned, he further promises a mutual indwelling in which the Father and Son will make their home in each one of us (14:20-21, 23). Thus
the question of where Jesus resides has far reaching implications, not the least of which results in the assurances that “where I am, there you may be also” (14:3) and “because I live, you will also live” (14:19).

The story draws to an end with the twin invitation to “come and see” aimed at overcoming the absence and distance between humanity and God. Walter Bruggemann aptly points out that “in the ‘tradition of presence,’ that is, the priestly tradition, it is anticipated that human persons may come to live in the very presence of Yahweh, so that the hoped-for goal of human existence is indeed communion with God, or in Martin Buber’s terms, ‘meeting.’” The evangelist knew his Scripture drawing from such passages as Psalm 66:5, “Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals” and Psalm 42:2, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?” Presence and communion therefore go hand in hand. The only thing that remains is whether or not we will risk an encounter with our Lord and Savior or choose to dwell with him.

My last weeks with Christine were life-changing as I thought through the Church’s proclamation of the gospel and our communal confession that Jesus lives. When one is faced with the fragility of human life, the promise of Presence calls for clarification as faith takes on a new dimension. Questions will always be a part of the human condition, but divine Presence overcomes uncertainty. One of the last images I left with Christine came from John’s account of the crossing of the sea (6:16-21). When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water during a tumultuous storm they were terrified. Jesus reassures them with the ancient theophanic formula, “It is I. Do not be afraid.” It is at this point that John makes a remarkable statement: “Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going,” (6:21). The real miracle in John is not Jesus walking on the water, but the fact that when Jesus is with us we will reach our destination.

1. Scripture citations are either my own translations from the NA27 or from the NRSV.

2. 1 Cor. 6:14, “And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power.” See also 1 Cor. 15:15; 2 Cor. 2:9; Rom. 4:24, 20-25; 6:4-9; 10:9; Gal. 1:1; and 1 Thess. 1:9-10 (cf. Eph. 1:20; 2:4-6; and Col. 2:12). Notice particularly the role of the Spirit (Rom. 8:11).

3. The term John (the evangelist) uses in the statement “he dwelt among us” is the Greek word for tabernacle. The significance of this word can be seen in the admonition to Moses, “And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them,” (Exod. 25:8 TNK).

LIFE IS LIKE A FILE CABINET:
BE YOURSELF!

Dr. Craig W. Ellison

Did you ever have a talk with your file cabinet? It has an incredible amount to tell you.

A couple of years ago, I was musing over my file cabinet and began to think about how much it had taught me about life. I had the God-given gift of relationships with many very well known people, which was wonderful but for a while had me wondering why I couldn’t have some of their talents. No matter how I longed to be like these brothers and sisters, I was just me...trying to teach like Paul Siu, Brian Widbin or many of you...no such success! I wanted to be a prize-winning author, but Gary Collins, Jim Dobson and Tim Clinton, among others, were my competition. This caused me to be dissatisfied with the contributions I had been able to make through my discipline. The result of these comparisons was that I felt very incompetent until I began to notice that my file cabinet was really the history of my life, not a reservoir of what I had done or had not done competitively. Slowly but surely, I began to change my view of the file cabinet and see it as a reservoir of the gifts that God had given specifically to me and I began to enjoy them as well as affirm others of the gift packages God had given them.

It’s very easy in academia to be dissatisfied with ourselves because we are being constantly compared to others and we compare ourselves with others. It’s important to remember that God has made each of us with special gifts and abilities, to cultivate those abilities and to accept ourselves as He has made us. I have been highly impressed during the last 25 years here at Nyack and ATS with the high quality of faculty, administration and staff members that we have here. We may not be Harvard, but we’ll give them a good run for it, just by being ourselves and following the gift track that God has given to us! In addition, we have the prospect of God’s “well done.” We’re not just academicians but we’re His servants as well. Let me encourage you to keep on with a heart of gratitude for what God is doing in your life, even if it doesn’t look or sound ritzy. When my life comes to an end, what matters most are family and people I’ve loved and the Lord I’ve served, not so much what I’ve produced.

Dr. Craig W. Ellison was the founding Director of the Alliance Graduate School of Counseling in Nyack, NY. He was professor of Urban Studies and Counseling at Alliance Theological Seminary from 1983 until his retirement in 2008. Dr. Ellison authored seven books, numerous articles on psychology and counseling and a Spiritual Well-being Scale that is nationally recognized. Through his writing and professional work he contributed to an emerging movement that sought to integrate tenets of evangelical Christian faith with principles of clinical psychology and counseling. Dr. Ellison went to be with the Lord on March 13, 2012.
Last winter, I went on a retreat. I was discouraged and I could not see a future for myself in my job. I know I didn’t want to pursue moving up anymore in the financial industry. I had already moved up four times in the past four years. At the time, I was comfortable in my position; I had an office, and I was getting more money than I had ever made in my life up to that point. I needed God to speak something into my life, to tell me who I was.

I only knew a few people at the retreat. Two of my friends were going on the retreat with me, and they already knew people because it was their college fellowship that was hosting. I took this as an opportunity for solitude, to seek God away from any distractions that I had, even people. This was a pleasant relief from the onslaught of responsibility that I endured during work. These four days were the longest I had taken off in four years besides being sick. Work wouldn’t allow it, and I know I was literally killing myself in this job. This was an opportunity for me to reflect and to listen to what God was saying to me.

I had signed up for a preaching workshop. This was strange for me because I had no real interest in preaching at the time. I just felt led to take it, I have always been afraid to speak in front of an audience and it was a surprise to my friends that I would take a workshop like that. The speaker spoke about a preacher as being a herald, the need for expository preaching, and that preaching was not comedy. He told a story about how funny he used to be when giving sermons in seminary and how his professor rebuked him for it. I thought, why was I serving God? Was it to serve God, or was it so others could think well of me?

I’m not sure if it was during the messages or during worship — probably throughout both that I felt God calling...
me away from my job. I felt that he wanted me to serve with all of my life, not just with my weekends. I spoke to my small group and asked them to please pray for me, because I felt a call to quit my job. After the retreat, we all left for home. I never kept in contact with my small group members, and I didn’t know them well to begin with, so there was no follow up with my call. I returned to work as if nothing had happened. I felt scared to quit. The economy was not good; our company was in constant flux since the merger that took place. I had no faith that God would take care of me if I decided to follow his call. I didn’t tell anyone about the call. I was afraid that once I said something, God would hold me accountable if I did not follow through.

It was around Memorial Day when God brought me to a decision. My boss was angry with me for some complications that went wrong with a branch-wide system upgrade and gave me an ambiguous ultimatum. He called me into his office and told me that I had to decide what I wanted to do. Even though I wasn’t sure about what he meant, I assumed it was about my position. I knew this was God’s way out for me. So the next day I told him that I would be quitting in three months to go to seminary. He told me maybe this was meant to be. I agreed. I kept asking God why it had to happen that way, but I knew why. It was because I was disobedient.

Since then, what I thought was hardship has turned out to be such freedom! I am so glad I have answered the call. Everything that I had anticipated to be a hardship has been taken care of. Of course I’m not making money anymore, but the blessing of time and the ability to pursue what God has called me to is much more rewarding than slaving away for something that I had no passion for whatsoever. I am now going into my second semester of seminary at ATS. I’m so thankful that God led me to this path and remained faithful even through my disobedience.
One of my classmates once said to me, “The deeper you study the Bible, the more you feel that what you have learned is not enough.” Then, he sighed, “There is no limit in the ocean of study; only hard work can help us to reach our goals.” That describes the exact feeling about my study last year. On one hand, as a sinner, I felt that I was not worthy to serve this holy, glorious, and almighty God. On the other hand, I felt that it was a privilege that I could receive more training after serving Him for seven years. I totally realize that I am studying by His grace, through His grace, for His grace, and about His grace. Besides having a deeper understanding about

the cultural background and the application of the Bible during this year, the passion and encouragement from my schoolmates also gave me a lot of motivation for campus and academic life. I added more than two dozen seminary friends on my Facebook this year. I cherish the friendships that I have made here. But I think the greatest benefit that I got last year was from the character and spiritual temperament assessments that I took in the spiritual formation class. In fact, I have done the same kind of assessments more than ten times during the last twenty years. However, when I had this chance to re-evaluate strengths and weaknesses in my character, the pattern of my study, my style of doing things, and my spiritual gifts, it helped me a lot to adjust the direction for my ministry in the future. One paper required us to make a workable and measurable plan, step by step, to carry out the vision that God gave us. When I meditated about the goals that God set for me in the future, God reconfirmed His calling for me. I once again humbly came before the Lord to rededicate myself for His services. At the same time, the burden and pressure of study was pushing me back to God. I had to beg for power and wisdom from Him every day. In fact, I do not have an extravagant hope for an extra-outstanding result. I just wish that His glory would be shown even through my weaknesses. I began to understand why Martin Luther said that in order to finish his daily work, he needed to pray three hours every day. My first year has finished. There are two more years to go. But I feel that there is a long way, and the responsibility is heavy.

My classmate sighed that there was no limit in the ocean of study; only hard working could help us to reach our goals. As for me, I believe that only God’s grace will help me through.

TRUSTING HIS GRACE

Moses Wu
Second year student
DEDICATION CAMP

On June 23, 2012, our Dedication Camp was held at ATS’s Nyack campus. More than 50 people attended this special event to seek God’s will and guidance for their lives.

More than 15 local pastors participated throughout the day, sharing their joy and struggle of following God’s calling for ministry. All attendees were encouraged by their heartfelt words, teaching, and counsel.

At the end of the day, more than half of the attendees responded to the challenge extended by Dr. Stanley Kwong committing to serve the Lord with their lives.

God’s will and desire for each person may be different, but He would love to see people come to Him with a willing heart to pursue Him and His guidance.
ALUMNI UPDATE

NEW MINISTRY
David Rong (May 2012) after graduating in May, is serving full time at the English congregation in Brooklyn Alliance Church, NY.
Abraham Koo (1990) is now the pastor at The Church of the United Brethren in Christ, NY.
Percy Wu (Dec 2011) is spending two years as an extern at Queens Herald Church, NY.

ORDINATION
Rong Hua Chen (2008) was ordained at Queens Herald Church, NY on February 4, 2012. He has been serving at the English congregation at that church for four years.
James Feng-Chin Len (1999) was ordained on March 10, 2012. The ordination ceremony was held at his home church, Rutgers Community Christian Church, NJ.
Heung Wing Lau (2007) was ordained on August 19, 2012 at Queens Herald Church, NY. He has been pastoring at this church since he graduated from the Seminary.
Gustav Hung (2002) was ordained on August 26, 2012 at New York Chinese Alliance Church, NYC, where he has served for four years.

COURSES offered at ROCKLAND CAMPUS

Winter 2013
Theological and Cultural Issues in the Chinese Church
Instructor: Dr. Cuong Tran
Date: January 7 – 11, 2013
Time: 8:30 am – 5:30 pm every day

Spring 2013
Planting and Growing Healthy Chinese Church
Instructor: Dr. Cuong Tran
Date: January 24 – May 2, 2013
Time: 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm Thursdays

Scholarships are available for those who are enrolled in the Chinese Studies Program. Contact the Chinese Studies Program for more information.