



He Never Left

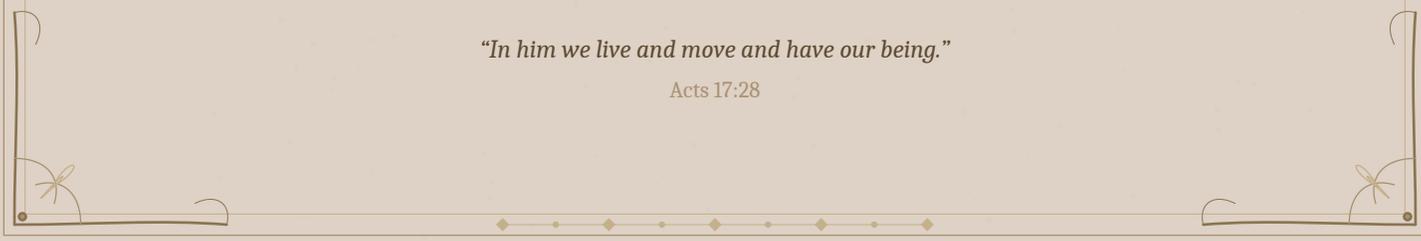
On Immanence, Eminence, and the Blindness After Easter



Timothy Solomon

"In him we live and move and have our being."

Acts 17:28





I

Three Words, One Failure

Is it emanance? Eminence? Immanence? Three words that sound nearly identical and that nobody can spell on the first try, which should tell you something. The English language circles this concept the way a moth circles a light, never quite landing, always almost burning. Emanance is not technically a word but it should be, something flowing out from a source. Eminence is a word but it points the wrong direction, upward, toward rank and station and a cardinal's title. And immanence, the one that matters, the theological one, the one that says God is not out there but in here, saturating the fabric of everything, that one we keep misspelling because we keep misunderstanding.

They are all trying to say the same thing. Emanation: something pours out from the source. Eminence: something rises above all things. Immanence: something dwells within all things. Three directions. Same origin. The light leaves the sun. The sun stands highest in the sky. The warmth is already in your skin. One event described three ways by a language that cannot hold it in a single word. This should sound familiar to anyone who has ever tried to describe the Trinity, or a resurrection, or the experience of being alive inside something you cannot name.

After the resurrection, Christ never left. This is not sentiment. This is not the soft thing people say at funerals when the casseroles have run out. This is structural. The resurrection was not a departure dressed as a miracle. It was the moment a localized presence became a universal one, and we have spent two thousand years staring at the sky waiting for a return that already happened because we were looking in the wrong direction.



II

The Evidence of Blindness

The gospels say this plainly if you read them without the assumption that you already know what they mean.

After the resurrection, nobody recognizes him. Mary Magdalene, who loved him enough to be the first at the tomb, sees him standing there and thinks he is the gardener. The disciples on the road to Emmaus walk beside him for miles, talking theology, grieving the very man next to them, and do not see. The fishermen in the boat do not know him until the net fills and someone squints across the water and says, that is the Lord.

This is not bad storytelling. This is the entire point.

He is there. He has been there the whole time. And they cannot see him until something breaks through that is deeper than sight. He says her name. *Mary*. He breaks the bread. He performs the abundance. And then, only then, do they recognize what was already in front of them. Not because he arrived. Because they finally saw.

Consider what kind of resurrection this is. If the point were that a dead man came back to life, there would be fireworks. He would walk into the Temple and overturn the tables again. He would stand before Pilate and let silence do the talking. He would appear in such glory that no one could deny what happened. But that is not what happens. What happens is quiet. Almost shy. He appears to the people who loved him and even they do not recognize him at first. He has to teach them how to see him again.

This is not the behavior of someone who returned. This is the behavior of someone who never left, waiting to be noticed.

The Fish in Water

Immanence, stripped of its theological upholstery, means exactly this. Not that God is abstractly present in all things as a kind of philosophical seasoning. But that Christ, post-resurrection, is the structure of reality itself, and we do not see him the way a fish does not see water. The way you do not see your own eyes. He is too close to perceive. He is the medium, not the message.

Paul says it directly. “In him we live and move and have our being.” Acts 17:28. That is not a metaphor. Or if it began as a metaphor it swallowed the referent and became literal. We are inside the Christ the way a character is inside a story. The story does not announce itself to the character. It does not need to. It is the condition of the character’s existence. The character who goes looking for the story will never find it, because the looking is already happening inside it.



III

The Suppression That Became the Signal

There is a deep irony to the crucifixion that most theology skates past too quickly. The cross was a Roman instrument of political communication. It was not merely an execution method. It was a broadcast. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves, pirates, and enemies of the state, staged deliberately in public places along major roads, designed to send a single unmistakable message: this is what happens to those who challenge Rome. The cross was the Roman Empire's most powerful tool of deterrence, and the authorities chose it for Jesus precisely because they wanted to make a spectacle. They wanted the movement to die in public, in shame, in the most degrading fashion available to imperial power.

The entire strategy rested on a reasonable assumption: that the movement was a cult of personality, entirely dependent on its founder, and that by eliminating the man they would decapitate the idea. Kill the shepherd and the sheep will scatter. This is how power has always thought about threats from below.

They were wrong. Not just wrong, but wrong in the specific way that produces the opposite of what was intended.

The Paradox of the Cross

The crucifixion was meant to prove that Jesus was no king, no messiah, no son of God. It was meant to humiliate. For a Jewish audience, a crucified messiah was a theological impossibility. Deuteronomy 21:23 says a hanged man is cursed by God. A messiah was supposed to be a victorious liberator, not a criminal dying the most shameful death available. For a Greco-Roman audience it was equally absurd. Their cultures venerated power, honor, and heroic ideals. Worshipping a man executed by the state as a common criminal was, as Paul acknowledged, sheer foolishness.

And yet the early Christians did not hide from this. They did not downplay the cross or explain it away. They placed it at the absolute center of their message and performed an act of meaning-making so radical that it inverted the entire semiotic system of the ancient world. The instrument of suppression became the icon of salvation. The thing designed to end the story became the story. The cross, which was supposed to communicate Roman supremacy, was hijacked and re-signified as the ultimate expression of divine love.

There is a name for this dynamic in the modern world. When an attempt to suppress information produces the opposite effect, amplifying the very thing it sought to destroy, we call it the Streisand Effect. The psychology behind it is not technological. It is ancient. It is the forbidden fruit principle. Tell people they cannot have something and their desire for it intensifies. Attempt to stamp out an idea and you signal that the idea is dangerous, which is to say important, which is to say worth investigating. The Roman Empire spent three centuries

persecuting Christians, and every wave of persecution produced the same result: more converts, stronger communities, a more refined theology. Tertullian was not being poetic when he said the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. He was being descriptive.

The cross was history's most consequential miscalculation. The authorities wanted to make an example of Jesus. They succeeded, just not in the direction they intended. They made him an example of something they could not have imagined and would not have understood: that the attempt to destroy a man was the precise mechanism by which he became something larger than a man. Something omnipresent. Something that could not be killed because the killing itself had been absorbed into the meaning.



IV

What We Are Expecting, and Whether We Expect It Too Naively

This is where we have to be honest about what immanence means, practically, in the world we actually live in. Because there are two readings and both may be true simultaneously, and the failure to hold them together is itself a kind of blindness.

The Symbolic Reading

The first reading is the one that feels safe. Christ is present in every act of selfless kindness. In the stranger who stops for you on the road. In the person who has never heard the name Jesus Christ but who gives without counting the cost, who lays something down for someone else without thinking about what they get back. There was a Christ consciousness before there was a Christianity and before there was a church. Whatever it was that moved in that man from Nazareth did not begin with him and did not end with him. It moved through every human being who ever embodied grace without knowing its name.

To see Christ in the gardener is not a failure of recognition. It may be the most accurate recognition in the entire gospel. The gardener tends the ground. The gardener nurtures what grows. The gardener is present in the place where things come back to life. If that is not the Christ, then we have understood nothing.

This reading has the advantage of being inclusive, generous, and broadly applicable. It allows the figure of Christ to escape the institutional boundaries of any one religion and

become a description of something universal in the human experience of love and sacrifice. It is a good reading. It is possibly a necessary reading. And it may also be a copout.

The Literal Reading

The second reading is the literal one, and it is no less defensible. That the God-man who hung on that cross genuinely has eminence in all things after the crucifixion. That this is not metaphor or poetry or comfortable theology but an ontological fact.

When Pilate nailed the sign above his head, INRI, *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*, Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews, he was being sarcastic. It was a taunt. A bureaucratic joke at the expense of the condemned. The chief priests objected, telling Pilate not to write “The King of the Jews” but rather “This man said, I am King of the Jews.” Pilate refused. “What I have written, I have written” (John 19:22). And when the centurion, a Roman soldier, a pagan, a man with no stake in Jewish prophecy, watched Jesus die and said “Truly this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:54), something irreversible happened. The pagan empire, the occupying power, the furthest thing from the faith of Israel, formally declared what the chosen people would not. And in that declaration, whether they meant it or not, the thing became true.

The symbol exceeded the intention. The sign Pilate wrote as mockery became a creed. The centurion’s confession, wrung out by the sheer force of what he had witnessed, became theology. The man transcended. And the argument can be made, must be made, that the transcendence did not happen at the resurrection. It happened at the cross. The resurrection was the proof. The transcendence had already occurred. The moment the most powerful empire on earth, through its own instruments of cruelty and its own officials, involuntarily testified to his kingship and his divinity, the thing was done. They meant it as defeat. It became coronation.

The Totality of Presence

And if that is the case, then every encounter with Christ since, whether in iconography, in scripture, in a stranger’s kindness, in a cathedral, in a curse, or even in a joke, is participation in that immanence. Every invocation is contact with the thing itself. The comedian who mocks him, the blasphemer who curses him, the child who hears the name for the first time and does not yet know what it means, the atheist who takes his name in vain, they are all inside it. The symbol has become so total that even its desecration is a form of witness. You cannot take the name of something in vain if that something is not present. The very capacity to invoke him, to react to him, to be offended or moved or bored by him, is proof of the immanence. You cannot escape a presence woven into the fabric of everything. You can only fail to notice it.



V

The Garden We Never Left

There is a parallel here that I have written about elsewhere, a parallel to another story about an exile that was never really an exile, and I said earlier I would leave it where it belongs. But the pattern is too exact to merely gesture at. It requires at least a moment of honest attention.

The story of Eden is a story of expulsion. God creates a garden of perfection, places humanity inside it, and humanity, through the questioning of that perfection, is cast out. This is the founding narrative of the Abrahamic world. It is the original exile. And it operates on the same perceptual error as the post-resurrection blindness.

We imagined ourselves cast out, but the gates were always open. If anything, we ran from Eden the moment we questioned it, and have been clawing at the door ever since, trying to force it open when it was never shut. The exile is real, but it is real the way a child's tantrum is real. The child rages against a boundary and says "You're so mean to me. Why do you hate me? Why are you doing this to me?" And the parent is not cruel, only holding a line, a line they themselves had to learn about what is safe, what is sustainable, what keeps love from destroying itself. The child believes the boundary is punishment, when in truth it is the edge of safety. They push against it, bruising themselves on the wall, and then imagine the wall itself as hostile. But the hostility was their own projection. The gates of Eden were never locked. The walls were never designed to harm. The pain was the discovery that boundaries exist, and the refusal to believe they could be both real and good.

The pattern is the same. The garden did not disappear. We stopped seeing it. The Christ did not leave. We stopped recognizing him. The separation, in both cases, is perceptual. A failure of attention, not a change in geography. And the two stories are not merely parallel. They are the same story told at two different scales. The exile from Eden is the macro version. The blindness after Easter is the micro. In both cases, the thing we believe we lost was never lost. In both cases, the door we are trying to force open was never shut. In both cases, what is required is not a journey back but a shift in vision. Not return but recognition. Not a second coming but a first seeing.



VI

A Jew Wrestling with Christ

I should say plainly that I am Jewish, and that writing this feels like something between a betrayal and a homecoming, and I cannot always tell which.

The Jew wrestles. That is the name. Israel: the one who wrestles with God. And I have wrestled with Christ my whole life, sometimes dismissively, sometimes with the reductionist arrogance of someone who thinks they already know the punchline to a story they never actually read. But something happened over time, through study and honesty and the slow erosion of pretense, and I found that the wrestling had turned into something else. Not belief exactly. Not conversion. Something more dangerous than either. Love.

I love the Christ. I do not know what to do with that as a Jew. I was not handed the cheat code at birth. There was no sacrament waiting for me, no baptism, no catechism, no church to walk into where someone would say welcome home and mean it in the way Christians mean it to each other. I had to find this on my own, through reason and challenge and the slow, stubborn refusal to stop asking questions even when the questions led me somewhere my ancestors would not have gone. And I feel both cursed and blessed by that. Cursed because there is no easy door. Blessed because every step toward this understanding was earned, contested, fought for against my own identity, and therefore mine in a way that nothing given freely can be.

And this is where the terror lives. Because I could tell myself that what I am describing is merely the Christ consciousness, the symbolic reading, the safe philosophical version where Jesus was a great teacher whose teachings ripple through history and that is all immanence means. That would be comfortable. That might even be a copout, a way to touch the flame without getting burned, a way to love the Christ without having to reckon with the Christ.

But the thing that keeps me honest, the thing that keeps me awake, is the possibility that the literal reading is not only just as valid but more terrifyingly accurate than any of us mortals can really comprehend. That the man on the cross genuinely did become something that saturates all of reality. That this is not a metaphor we are living inside but an event we are living inside. And that the symbolic reading, far from being the sophisticated one, is actually the flinch. The retreat from something too vast to face directly.

I do not collapse these two readings into one. I hold them both, and the tension between them is where the honesty lives. The symbolic Christ and the literal Christ may be the same Christ viewed from two distances, the way a mountain looks like a painting from far away and like a landslide up close. Both true. Both terrifying in different ways. And perhaps the ability to hold both, without resolving the contradiction, without choosing the comfortable one or the dramatic one, is itself a kind of faith. The faith of the Fool, who does not need to know which

reading is correct in order to know that something real is being pointed at by both.



VII

The Expansion

The ascension was not an exit. It was an expansion. Christ did not go up. He went everywhere.

The limitation of being one man in one body in one place at one time, that was the kenosis, the self-emptying, the extraordinary compression of incarnation. God, who is everywhere, choosing to be somewhere. The Logos that sustains all things, voluntarily contracted into a single human life in a single province of a single empire at a single moment in history. That was the miracle of incarnation. Not that God became man, but that infinity chose to be finite. That the whole poured itself into a part.

The resurrection reversed the compression. What had been contained in Nazareth and Galilee and Jerusalem and a cross became, in a single breath, the whole of things. The entire universe became the body. And we, still thinking in the grammar of locations and departures and return tickets, looked up at the sky and asked where he went.

He did not go anywhere. We stopped seeing.

And the proof of this is everywhere, in every direction, at every scale. It is in the two billion people who carry his name. It is in the architecture of every city in the Western world. It is in the calendar we use to mark our days, which pivots on the axis of his birth. It is in the moral grammar of every culture his story has touched, whether they acknowledge the source or not. It is in the hospitals named for his saints and the universities built on his theology and the art that has tried for two millennia to capture something that cannot be captured. It is in the fact that I, a Jew, am writing about him right now, and you, whoever you are, are reading this, and neither of us can get away from the subject no matter how hard we might try.

This is not cultural influence. This is immanence. This is what it looks like when a presence has become so total that it is indistinguishable from the fabric of the world.



VIII

The Three Words Again

And this is where the three words collapse back into one.

The emanation pours out, the eminence rises, the immanence saturates, and all three describe the same event from different vantage points. Christ is the light flowing from the source. Christ is the one exalted above all names. Christ is the one closer to you than your own breathing. Emanation, eminence, immanence. Three words. One presence. The same inability to hold it in language, which is itself a kind of proof. The things that are most real are the things we cannot quite say.

That is what the spelling problem at the beginning is actually about. Not that I cannot find the right word. The right word does not exist. The thing it points toward is too total for language to contain, which is why we keep almost-saying it in three different ways and never landing. The language fails because the reality exceeds the container, and the failure of the container is evidence for the scale of what it is trying to hold.

And perhaps that is what the disciples on the road to Emmaus discovered as well. That recognition does not come through the intellect, or the eyes, or the correct vocabulary. It comes when he breaks the bread. When she hears her name. When the net fills and you realize the abundance was always there, just beneath the surface, waiting for you to stop looking in the wrong direction.



He never left. We forgot how to look.

