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Gonna Fly Now: Rocky, Jesus, and the Ascension

Rocky with up-stretched arms is an icon of American pop culture. You may be hearing in your head the triumphant theme from Rocky ("Gonna Fly Now" by Bill Conti) as you picture the boxer climbing those famous steps of the Museum of Art in Philadelphia. It's hard to imagine Rocky Balboa as anything but a champion, but he didn't start out that way.

Rocky and Rocky II have three different scenes in which the southpaw from "Philly" climbs those famous steps. The first time we see this Rocky is a tired, heavy-breathing mess with a pain in his side. First time viewers are left to wonder if he can make it as a boxing champion.

The second time this occurs we see a montage of Rocky running faster, working out harder, and eventually ascending the "Rocky steps" with ease. As the music crescendos, Rocky reaches the top, leaps into the air and thrusts the fists of a champion into the air. In the power and excitement of that moment we start to believe Rocky can fight and win, becoming the heavyweight champion of the world.

The third time we see this jog through the working class streets of Philadelphia, the moment becomes more than just a sign that Rocky is going to win a boxing match. As soon as Rocky hits the streets, we hear people calling out his name. Grocers come out their shops yelling, "You go Rocky!" Ladies point. Young men pump their fists in the air. And then a small group of children begin to follow him. As Rocky's run takes him to his usual destination, the crowd of young people following him becomes bigger and more enthusiastic. The soaring strings, the youthful chorus, and the triumphal horns also sing the praises of Rocky Balboa.

On this third ascent up the stairs of the museum, not only does Rocky look heroic as he sprints up the stairs, but he looks downright messianic as the throngs of boys and girls chant "Rocky, Rocky, Rocky!"

Some of this may be intentional as Sylvester Stallone purposely had the original movie start with an icon of Jesus as its first image. As we see Rocky look like a champion, he leads a train of young champions, giving them the gift of inspiration. This cinematic moment reminds me of the ascension of our Lord Jesus. What the scene of Rocky on the steps accomplishes has some similarities to what really happened with Jesus, humanity, and all creation with the ascension.

Luke describes the moment succinctly in his gospel saying,

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God (Luke 24:50-53 NIV).

One of the questions I have as I read this is, why are they inspired to worship him? And also, why are they filled joy? I don't think the Church has figured out everything that happened in the ascension, but there are a few things I've learned about this moment in salvation history.

When Jesus disappeared into the cloudy sky, some of his followers were inspired to worship the man with whom they once walked and talked, worked and played. The most basic reason for this is

the Spirit. He inspired their response. But I also think there were biblical themes informing their thoughts. I believe that in the moment or upon later reflection they realized two things:

- 1) Jesus has been given a special place of divine authority.
- 2) Jesus has taken up a special intercessory role.

When the crowds cheer for Rocky Balboa, they are recognizing him as the one who is chosen to fight for them as their champion. In their hearts, he fights for Philly. Jesus ascended is also recognized as just such a champion with the authority to make "enemies a footstool for [his] feet ." As our champion, Jesus is given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18) as the risen and ascended One. In Acts, Luke describes Jesus being at "the right hand of God" (2:32-36) to denote the divine source of his authority.

Elsewhere, Paul wants to make clear the full extent of this "right hand" authority when he says Jesus was placed "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:19-23). Some in the Church probably realized that Jesus had been predicting this ascension authority all along when he called himself the Son of Man--pointing them to the vision in Daniel 7:13-14. It seems the Church was given to realize in that moment, or after some thought, the Father was displaying the authority given to the risen Jesus.

This special authority placed on Jesus, as the human in union with divinity, would have been enough to make him worthy of worship, but there was more going on in this moment. Jesus was also being taken up into a special intercessory role.

Rocky represents the people of Philadelphia, the people of brotherly love, and he fights against a symbol of paganism ("Apollo Creed," or "belief in Apollo"). Similarly, Jesus is the personal means by which God deals with evil and mediates to us everything that God wants for us.

This is an ongoing role that the people of Israel foreshadowed in the role the High Priest fulfilled for Israel and in the way she was a kingdom of priests for the world. The author of Hebrews connects the inauguration of this priestly role with the ascension when calling Jesus "a great high priest who has gone through the heavens" (4:14).

One aspect of this mediation is that Jesus made humanity fully present with the Trinity in his person and in the sending of the Spirit. In the ascension, he gathered us into the communion of the Triune God so by the Spirit's sending we may enjoy the life of the Father, Son and Spirit. This dual action of Jesus ascending and the Spirit proceeding is the means by which we are embraced into the life of the Trinity.

This gifting of the Spirit is not for us alone but a way for the whole creation to be filled with God's grace and glory. Paul brings these ideas together when he says, "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men ... He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe" (Ephesians 4:7-10).

The movie visualizes this when Rocky is seen gathering and leading a similar train of children up the steps of the museum.

The first believers responded with worship when they recognized Jesus' divine authority, his merciful mediation, and eventually his gifting of the Spirit. This worship was filled with exuberant joy. I think part of this joy came from a powerful sense of assurance. They must have been overjoyed when they realized that a risen and ascended Jesus meant they had nothing to fear in this life of the next. They were now a people who were walking in a sort of risen and ascended life through Jesus and by the Spirit.

The children who followed Rocky also experienced great joy. They rejoiced in seeing the strength of their champion and in the feeling of accomplishment as they finished the race up the stairs as well.

Paul also talks about how the ascension of Jesus can affect us on the deepest levels of our being. We can have joy that plums the depths of our soul because Jesus has gone to the heavenly right hand. He puts it this way for the Colossian believers: "Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above ... [for] your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (from 3:1-5). When this reality is lived out in a life of faith, it can bring healing to all that we are as humans — heart, mind and all things.

The scene of Rocky running through the city and up the steps to the sounds of "Gonna Fly Now" is so effective on many levels for many reasons. It speaks to his rise from lowly club fighter, who by all appearances didn't have a chance, to a powerful champion who now had the strength of body and spirit to take the crown. Jesus ascends to reveal himself as humanity's champion.

Rocky is shown as an inspiration to the city of brotherly love as he brings joy and excitement in anticipation of his victory. Jesus ascended is the inspiration of all that is good in us, as he unites us with God and mediates all goodness to us by the Spirit.

Rocky's transformation of his whole self inspires the young to run and transform their lowly bodies to become more like his champion body. Jesus' ascension is the revelation of true, pure, and perfected humanity already transformed and someday to be revealed in us at the end of this age.

Rocky's ascension up the stairs, with his train of children following, is not the end, but ultimately leads to his final revelation as the victor who wins for love of his bride Adrian. Jesus ascended was not the end, not a sad goodbye, but the assurance that victory is won and ultimately Jesus will call forth his victorious bride in the midst of a victorious creation. Jesus ascended is champion over all evil, for the good of all humanity. It's a joy that fills our souls and all creation with the soaring glory of his grace.

Who's gonna fly now? We fly with Jesus and will someday soar with all creation.

~ Benjamin Martinez