

Ascending and Descending...
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – May 16, 2021

Please Read:
Acts 1:6-11
Luke 24:44-53

This past Thursday was *Ascension Day*, 40 days after Easter, according to Luke. In Acts 1:3, Jesus is depicted as leaving the awestruck disciples outside of Jerusalem at Mt. Olivet and is “lifted up” and taken by a cloud out of their sight. It is a holiday largely ignored by most Protestants, but it is as important a holiday as Christmas or Easter for the Eastern Orthodox churches. In fact, this is the event where paradoxically Jesus leaves so that his disciples can get on with his work here on planet earth.

The question is asked of the disciples, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Unfortunately, this past Thursday Christians, Jews, Muslims in Jerusalem and around Israel were looking up in the sky to see from where the latest missiles were coming. The violence has increased not only on the ground in Jerusalem but in multiple cities in Israel and most intensely in the Gaza strip after the Israeli Air Forces made various bombing raids this past week. Dozens have been killed but it is over ten to one, Palestinian to Israeli fatalities rate. I ask you to pray for a friend and colleague in East Jerusalem, the Rev. Carrie Ballenger. She is an ELCA missionary serving as the pastor of the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem as well as the assistant to the bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land.

It’s sad to see this outbreak of violence, the worst since 2014, but the tensions have been growing and if you know anything about the situation in Israel, well, it’s complicated... Jews, Christians and Muslims all have holy sites in Jerusalem, and grievances against each other.

The fact that Jesus in our text today is taken up into the clouds apparently exacerbates the problem of violence in our world today, particularly in the “holy land.” What good is a savior if he’s not around to save you?

Soteriology is one of those 50 cent theological terms that is about how salvation really works. And it’s worth considering just how Jesus saves and what is our part in God’s work of saving the world...

First of all, Luke makes an important comparison between Jesus and two Old Testament heroes, Moses and Elijah. Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai receiving the commandments of God (Exodus 24:18) and then teaching the people of Israel what God expected of them. According to Acts, Jesus spent 40 days after Easter instructing the disciples more about the Kingdom of God. You’ll remember that it was back at the *Transfiguration* we saw Moses and Elijah with Jesus in the clouds on a mountain top.... God led Moses and the Israelites with a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day... Elijah was “lifted up” to heaven as well... If you remember, he had to ascend to heaven so that his disciple Elisha could receive a double portion of his prophetic spirit (2 Kings 2:9). The point is that Luke is connecting Jesus with the new Messianic leadership for the people of God. He is the Anointed One. He is the new Savior.

Rather than charging ahead, Jesus first commands his disciples to wait. This is perhaps the most obvious part of the spiritual life that is lost in our immediate-gratification, instant-communication, and “I want it now!” culture. There are so many situations in life that simply require time. We all have to wait...to figure out mask protocols (!), or for the long recovery process after surgery, or for the next round of chemo, or to hear what the results of tests are, or to learn about the next job opportunity, or what school accepted your application, or for a child to be born, or for a loved one to slip away into eternity... Waiting is simply a part of life. The question is, how do we wait?

Jesus tells his disciples to wait because discernment takes time, and if the disciples acted on their own power, they would reflect the same old same old way of doing things. Jesus tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit to guide and empower them to live in a new way for the new Age Jesus has inaugurated.

Perhaps here is one of the most important theological truths of the Ascension. Jesus is making space for the Holy Spirit to come and be the central focus and engine of the life of the Church. This is another insight into the Divine nature of the Trinitarian God we worship. It's not about grabbing power and taking center stage. It's about giving power away and making space for others! Please hear this: Jesus needed to leave so the Holy Spirit may take her rightful place as the Advocate, the One who comes along side of the disciples of Jesus to teach, to fill, and to empower us and send us forth into the world for self-giving love...

It is the Spirit of God who continues to push us beyond our limited vision and understanding. The first disciples are asking Jesus about when God will restore the Kingdom to Israel... (Acts 1:7). Jesus' answer is pointing to a whole *new paradigm*. The Kingdom is no longer about one religious or ethnic group. It is no longer about one place. Rather, “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And then he leaves.

It is no wonder that there is this awkward moment when the disciples are left standing gawking at the sky, awestruck at the sheer wonder of this flying superhero. “Up, up, and away!” The problem is, he is leaving them! It is just then in the account when Luke writes, “Suddenly, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?’” In other words, what are you doing here with your hankies in your hand, wishing you could have gone with him, or that he stayed? You have work to do, so get on with it!

And so we do... We are supposed to be giving witness to the gospel of God's grace. We are supposed to be giving witness to the *love of God as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ*. We are supposed to be doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God. Unfortunately, God's grace and love are not always the first things that come to mind when people think about Christians!

Here is the paradox of the Ascension: Jesus goes to heaven so that *we* might do his mission on earth! And it is the Holy Spirit who is going to help us. It's counter-intuitive, but the Holy Spirit descends upon us so that we might be lifted up to do the Kingdom building work here on earth. The question is, what type of witness are we giving, and what type of Kingdom are we building?

I love what Annie Dillard describes in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. She writes,

*In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.*¹

You see, Annie Dillard is saying that the spiritual journey moves downward and inward, not upward toward abstraction. It moves downward toward the hardest concrete realities of our lives. This is a reversal of what we traditionally understood spirituality to be, which was up and out --- or “up, up, and away” spirituality!²

David Brooks identifies in his book, *The Road to Character*, a key transformation that is at the heart of Christian faith:

“The Gospels brought about a revolution in morals. To put it broadly, there was a shift from a desire for power to a desire for sacrificial love. Even just speaking as a historian of ideas, culture, and behavior, that was a radical revolution that created a radical counterculture.

*Today when we hear the word counterculture, we think of hippies in the 1960s. But the hippies ultimately represent the same individualistic striving we see from Apple computer and Ben & Jerry's. The true counterculture is found in faith... It's about living by a totally different moral logic. The logic of the Bible and the language of humility - that's the real counterculture.”*³

If we are giving countercultural witness through humble service, through sacrificial love, and that is not attracting more people, I'm OK with that. But let's be clear, our world is increasingly caught up in struggles for power. We are seeing it in the polarity politics in this country, we are seeing it in international conflicts, and sadly, we too often see it in the church. Power takes on a life of its own, and if we go down the path of “more is better,” it matters not where the power is coming from or where it takes you. It's just all about more power!

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expedition and Encounters* (San Fran.: Harper, 1988), 25ff.

² Parker Palmer, *Leading from Within* chapter in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000).

³ David Brooks: Interview by Jeff Haanen: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/june/david-brooks-we-need-to-start-talking-about-sin-and-righteo.html>

This is why it's important to identify what spirituality we're really talking about when we say we are living spiritually. *Jesus was about giving power away.* As he went up, the Spirit would come down for us!

So in just a moment we will ordain and install new officers of our church, both Elders and Deacons. My favorite part of the service since my own ordination was the kneeling down and laying on of hands. It's a reminder that we are servant leaders, and that the power that will be transformative and lasting is not our own but comes from God.

As we move into a new season of ministry and mission as a congregation, this is a good time to reflect on how are we going to give witness to Christ here and now. That's what the Ascension is all about. How do we respond to the question, "Why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you, will come in the same way as you saw him go. For soon the Holy Spirit will come to you in power, and *you* will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, *and New Canaan* and to the end of the world!"

I don't know what we can do besides pray for our friends in Israel these days, but I do know that we can reach out to our Muslim and Jewish neighbors and colleagues here, and express our compassion and concern for the violence there. We also can take time to consider concrete action here to feed the hungry, visit prisoners, pursue justice for marginalized or excluded people, particularly our neighbors of color or of the LGBTQ community. As Mother Teresa often shared, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." We can show kindness for those around us by giving up power rather than trying to grab it for ourselves.

Finally, consider the prayer commonly attributed to Teresa of Avila. It is a faithful response to the message of the Ascension: "God of love, help us to remember that Christ has no body now on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world. Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone now. Ours are the feet with which now God is to go about doing good."⁴

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

⁴ Teresa of Avila, quoted in Dorothy M. Stewart, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Prayers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 70.