

Sermon “This is the Story that Never Ends”

Kirk of St James

Sunday May 12, 2024

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Chad once pointed out something interesting to me that I had never considered before. The English language tends to associate the direction “up” with positive ideas. When things are going well, we often say “Things are looking up.” When things are not going well or, to imply a negative mood, we say things like “I’m down in the dumps.” But when someone tries to help us when we’re grumpy or a little depressed, we’ll say “Thanks – you’ve lifted my spirits.” When asked where someone fits in the hierarchy of business management, we say things like “Oh, he’s pretty far up the ladder.” The famous late film critic – Roger Ebert – trademarked his classic “Thumbs Up” phrase for his approval of good movies. If we took more time this morning, I’m sure we could think of countless more examples where the word “up” is related to something positive.

The idea of up is important today. After the resurrection of Jesus, he spent the next forty days with the disciples, teaching them, guiding them, and performing miracles. Now on this ascension Sunday we find ourselves looking up, as Jesus is taken back up into heaven, and the disciples are sent out into the world to share the good news. While ascension concludes the events of Easter, it is a Sunday very rarely recognized. Most likely because it is the part we understand the least. Jesus as a baby we can understand. Resurrection itself is a mystery, but Jesus comes back and keeps teaching just as he had before, so we can understand at least in part. Ascension however is difficult. What does it mean Jesus ascended? Where does he go? What does ascension mean for us?

Before we can even begin to address these questions, we have to admit that the ascension poses a special challenge for us, one that perhaps we’d rather avoid. We understand the problem well enough. The historical church does not, as a matter of fact, believe that Jesus ended his earthly ministry with the equivalent of a rocket launch, rising a few hundred miles above the earth to his home. Nor does the church think Jesus was the first to be “beamed up,” to use the term made so familiar by *Star Trek*.

As one theologian has noted, “In part, the problem we face arises from the profound change in worldview that occurred with the coming of modern science. Until Copernicus, nearly everyone believed that planet Earth sat firmly fixed at the centre of the universe and that celestial bodies – the sun, the moon, and stars – all rotated around us. For Jesus to go “up” then, may have been mysterious but not wholly inconceivable for the people of his time. For example, the great religious art of medieval Europe showed Jesus in Heaven just above the clouds. Back then, we could stand here, point up, and say that Jesus went *there*, thinking that he could look down on us through the clouds, as we might from the window of an airplane. Thanks to Copernicus, however, going “up” is no longer a coherent idea. Today there is no more “up,” if by that we mean a fixed spatial location always above our heads. Oh, it still looks like there’s “up” to us, but we know the Earth spins and rotates and we now have a better idea of what’s beyond that blue sky that we perceive daily. And as of the 21st century, we have not come across Heaven up there somewhere just beyond our atmosphere.”

When I read that I could not help thinking of how I thought of heaven when I was younger. When I was little and heard about heaven, I pictured people up on the clouds looking down on us. The first time I flew in an airplane, and saw the other side of the clouds, I could not make sense of Heaven, and this idea of "up." So what really happened on that Judean hillside so long ago?

The text that we read this morning, does say that the disciples watched as Jesus went up. What were they witnessing then? I think at this point, it’s important to note that this text in Acts links ascension with resurrection. According to the text, Jesus “presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them for 40 days.” The significance of Easter resurrection and ascension are tied together as two parts of a single whole. Together they constitute one sweeping forty day movement that brings the obedient Christ not just from the grave to the skies but from death and godlessness to the place of highest honor at the right hand of God the Father. The distance bridged in this movement of resurrection and ascension is not measured in the number of miles from earth to heaven, but in the amount of evil and destruction that separates us from God, and was conquered by Christ. It is not the force of gravity that must be overcome to properly understand the ascension, but rather the forces of sin and death. The

ascension is an essential event. Jesus not only leaves behind an empty tomb, but his tomb *stays* empty. The ascension is critical because (as Chad likes to point out to me) without it, the resurrection – the conquering of death – would mean very little.

But we still haven't solved our problem of up. Where exactly is this Heaven – the kingdom of God? The theologian Jurgen Moltmann poses the question quite bluntly to us: “*Where was Jesus raised to?*” Moltmann agrees that Jesus does not simply go up into the sky, for Moltmann, “Jesus was raised into the coming glory of the Father. Jesus is risen into the coming kingdom of God.” Heaven's emphasis is not about a spatial location – it's a relational one. The pure and holy relationship of humanity with God and God with humanity. That's the kingdom of God.

And that kingdom is quite different from the ones the disciples expected. Can we blame them for having different ideas about this coming kingdom? If we put ourselves into the shoes of the disciples – our teacher has been crucified, but then raised from the dead. Nothing can kill our leader. Surely now is the time to reclaim Israel from the Roman Empire and be truly free! They say as much in the story in Acts: “Lord, is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” For forty days since his resurrection, Jesus has been talking about the kingdom. They reason that he must mean the promised kingdom. So, longing to finally free their land from her captors, they ask him, “Is it time?” But the kingdom they ask about is not the kingdom of which Jesus has been speaking. For forty days, Jesus has taught about the kingdom of *God*, whereas the disciples want to know about the kingdom of *Israel*.

And so, Jesus coaxes them toward a new idea of the kingdom. The kingdom of God on Earth. This is another reason why the ascension is so important to us today – it signifies the joining of the holy and human. The mingling of Heaven and Earth. The kingdom of God on earth, Jesus tells his friends, will be built on their backs – on their witnesses – on their martyrdom. It's a daunting task. The disciples probably didn't think they were up to it. As Jesus ascended, the disciples were left with their insecurities – with their fear that they could not help bring the kingdom of God to earth. As they gaze up staring at Christ rising into the air, they are probably thinking to themselves, “Well, now what do we do?”

Out of nowhere, two men dressed in white robes appear to help them with that question. While these disciples on the hillside are obsessing over Jesus going “up” - in the midst of this divine event - these two men call the people back to their work – back to their calling – back to their mission. The disciples are commissioned not to stand there looking up; they’re called to look ahead – to look forward – to look at the work that must be done on this earth. The two messengers urge them ahead to active engagement out of love for humanity.

This morning, we celebrate the ascension and what it means for us as Christians. The ascension is the concluding chapter of Easter. It is a movement that isn’t as concerned with depicting Heaven somewhere in the sky, but rather as a movement which recaptures what was accomplished on the cross – where death and sin were defeated, where heaven and earth collide. Acts is part two of what Luke started in his gospel. “It is all about what Jesus is continuing to do and teach. The mysterious presence of Jesus haunts the whole story. He is announced as King and Lord, not as an increasingly distant memory but as a living and powerful reality, a person who can be known and loved, obeyed and followed, a person who continues to act within the real world. That, Luke is telling us, is what this book is going to be all about. We call it the “The Acts of the Apostles” but in truth we should think of as “The Acts of Jesus Part II.”

This book should be read on two levels it is both a book that tells us about the life of Jesus, and it is also a book about how we are invited to become a part of the story. There is no ending here, we are still living it out! The ascension, the conclusion of Easter, centers us in God, and at the same time urges us forward. It ironically focuses our attention not only upward, but also forward. It calls us to the mission Christ left with us. And we are able to be a part of this mission with the help of the Holy Spirit. On this ascension Sunday, we are reminded of our calling as disciples of Christ. May we continue to discover and live this truth afresh and anew by looking ahead and with the power of the Spirit. Amen.