

## Sermon for May 24, 2020 – “Perspective”

Ascension Of the Lord, Year A – Texts: Luke 24:44-53; The Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11

**Rev. Dr. Jeff Colarossi, Westwood First Presbyterian Church**

A preacher found three little boys sitting on a curb playing hooky from school. “Don’t you want to go to heaven?” he admonished them. “I sure do,” two of the boys answered but the third replied, “No sir.” “What’s the matter, don’t you want to go to heaven when you die?” “Oh, when I die!” exclaimed the youngster. “Of course I do, when I die. I thought you were getting up a crowd to go now!”

Today is a peculiar day in the Christian calendar. It’s Ascension Sunday, the day when we hear the story of Jesus’ departure from His disciples following the resurrection. We are, in a sense, celebrating Jesus’ going away which, in itself, is sort of odd. And if you think about it long enough it’s yet another one of those Bible stories that raises some interesting questions. The answers to which are important indeed.

What am I talking about? Well, in the Apostle’s Creed we acknowledge that Jesus “ascended into Heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.” He ascended, yes. But where did He physically go? And how, for that matter, did He get there? The passage from Luke that we just read says, **“While He was blessing them He withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.”** That image of Jesus rising into the sky has been a popular theme in art through the centuries. That image even graces one of our sanctuary windows.

Now, from a first century, pre-scientific view of the natural world, it made sense for Jesus to go to be with God. And to do that He would have gone up into the “dome of the heavens.” I call it that, the dome of the heavens, because even though the Greeks had developed astronomy centuries earlier most in Jesus’ time believed that the earth was flat and that the sky was like a bowl turned over on top of the flat disc of the world. They had little understanding of the infinite universe all around them.

Some Christians still live in a three-story universe, heaven above, earth between, hell below. Heck, there are times when I look upward when I pray, and I’ll bet some of you do too. But few people believe, as Marshall Applewhite leader of the infamous “Heaven’s Gate” cult did, that if you get into a spaceship and fly far enough you’ll find a place called “heaven.” Now, you can call me crazy but I think we can say with confidence that where God dwells is **not** a geographic place that we could get to in a spaceship, nor does it have spatial dimensions...at least not as we know/understand them.

Among other things, which I’ll get to in a moment, the Ascension reminds us that Christianity is not only an historical faith but a faith of the present and future. Jesus is, right now in glorified humanity, on the throne of the universe. And He has, as Matthew’s account of these events reminds us, “all authority in heaven and on earth.”

So, Jesus isn't just our suffering servant who came, died, and triumphantly rose, but our actively **ruling**, actively **conquering** king. Despite the ignorance, negligence, even animosity directed toward Him in the world today, Jesus already sits enthroned and is in His perfect timing and sovereignty subduing the forces of evil and darkness. This was happening when you went to bed last night, while you slept, when you woke up this morning and it's happening even as I speak! Talk about a "never-ending battle!" This is what scholars call the "outrageous claim" of the ascension. It's outrageous because His rule isn't recognized in His world. Need proof? Check the news headlines!

Yet the story of the ascension is the story of the enthronement of Jesus as the king of the world. It's Jesus' ascension into the presence of God that gets all that He accomplished "down here" to count for us "up there" with God. Without Jesus's ascension there'd be no true access to God, no full measure of the Spirit, and no great salvation. The ascension is a link in the chain of salvation, as essential as Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. And the ascension has something powerful to say about humanity and the human body. What I mean is this, the ascension is the story of a body moving to heaven. It is not escape from the bodily realm but the entry of humanity in all our physical-ness into heaven – the sphere of God. Far from diminishing the importance of the body, the ascension is the ultimate affirmation of bodily existence. The Son of God Himself has a body not as a historical convenience but as a permanent presence in heaven, a **physical** presence which bodes pretty well for the rest of us.

Now, all this is well and good, but so what? What are we to make of Jesus' ascension? What's the real point? Why's this important? What does this mean for us?

To answer these questions we need to do a little unpacking of the readings, both of which describe the Ascending Christ. In the account in the second reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles the disciples quiz Jesus about the fulfillment of history, in particular, the restoration of Israel. Notice that Jesus' response is vague. It's vague for a reason and thus remains something to which those who seek a precise date for judgment day, or the fulfillment of history the so-called "end times", **really** need to pay attention. Jesus tells His followers, "**It is not for you to know the times or periods.**" Rather, we're to await the coming of God's Spirit, the power from on high, what we might call the missional or vocational power that comes from the Holy Spirit whether in the First or Twenty-first centuries.

After this Jesus is lifted up and the disciples are left gazing into the heavens until an angel admonishes them, "**Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?**" The angel promises Jesus' ultimate return but that's not the point. The point is that the apostles' mission, **our** mission, is right **here**, right **now** in our time and place, on our planet not some far off sphere, some other reality or otherworldly dimension. In other words, don't look up—look around. Here's where the **disciples** become **apostles**; those who've learned at the feet of Christ, are now charged with being messengers of the Good News of Christ.

And here, brothers and sisters, is the **first** of two things. The point of ascension is **perspective**. Rising to the clouds gives us a broader perspective on our lives and the planet upon which we live. Rather than individualistic images of salvation and personal well-being, ascension challenges us to bring heaven to earth. It challenges us to live out the message of Jesus while sharing it with others. As the Lord's Prayer proclaims, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Now, to be clear, I'm not talking about anything like a moral high ground or that we're higher up on the spiritual food chain or at a loftier position in heaven's hierarchy, I'm talking about a higher, **different** perspective.

And here, brothers and sisters, is the **second** thing. With **this** perspective we can transcend our own self-interest to embrace the well-being of friend and enemy alike. In fact, the well-being of all of creation. Today, we're called to "go up" to find higher ground, not to escape the world's crises but to gain a vision and mission larger than ourselves or even our church. And we don't need to look heavenward to find inspiration.

Brothers and sisters, the ever-present God is right here in the person of the Holy Spirit giving us all the guidance and inspiration we need if we but look beyond ourselves. Our mission is here to heal, to embrace, to welcome, and to love.

Christ is Risen.

Christ is Risen indeed.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.