

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
6th Sunday in Easter
May 26, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

2 Kings 2:5-13

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Acts 1:1–11 NRSV

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Ascension: Looking Up?

The word, “up,” gets a lot of use from us. It is an adverb, describing or **directing** an action. So, we **look up**. We **stand up**. We “**take up**” for one another when there is a bit of trouble. On a more common level, we use figures of speech featuring this common two-letter word:

- Things are **looking up**: getting better.
- We keep our **chins up**: trying to be optimistic.
- We make our **way up** a hill, but prices can go **way up**, as well.
- We **hold up** someone else: delaying an event or meeting.
- We are **held up**: Someone takes something from us, such as money.
- In another meaning entirely, we **hold up** others: we support and sometimes defend those who need assistance, or we even honor another person.

In contrast, in worship we often **look down** in thought and prayer in a position of humility or heartfelt emotion. But, at other times in worship or prayer we are **looking up** in hope and in wonder.

Well, we could exhaust our time together in continuing this, but these are useful images to hold in our minds as we go deeper into these verses in our scripture lesson today. Here, the **Risen Christ** advised and instructed the disciples in Jerusalem during the **forty days** following his resurrection. The disciples were asking him a question, when Jesus rises before them and **ascends into a cloud**, and they can no longer see him. It is startling, fascinating, **wondrous**, and somewhat hypnotizing.

To illustrate the fascination of human beings with wondrous events, I would like to point you to a **painting** from the 16th century which shows the disciples on the ground and the viewer's perspective is between the ground and the sky, so that the observer gets a glimpse of Christ's pierced feet and lower legs just below the cloud. The rest of Christ is out of the picture, **obscured by the cloud** from the knee up. I think there is both realism and some tongue-in-cheek humor in that image. And, each of us can make what we like out of our own mental images of this moment described in *Acts*. Obviously, people have had **varying impressions** over the centuries.

But, if we are aware of the **Hebrew scriptures**, as many of the disciples were, this whole event in our scripture lesson would seem familiar. You probably can note the similarities found in our description of the ascension of the prophet **Elijah** in our Old Testament reading this morning. And, earlier in *Luke* the **Transfiguration of Christ** described a **cloud** coming over the scene, which indicated a **divine visitation**. Similarly, in *Exodus* a cloud goes before the people of Israel, as **God's presence** led the Hebrew people through the wilderness.

Beyond these factors, you and I have another level of difficulty understanding this event, because of the bias of our **modern reasoning** which complicates things even further. Our knowledge of science hinders us from taking in the deeper meaning of this moment. For the Hebrew people, heaven was always **above the earth**. Today, having explored major portions of our solar system and beyond, we are left with an underlying concern: Our age old question, "Where is heaven?"

While there is this literal sense that heaven is **above our earthly existence**, we know from modern knowledge and science that there is a void surrounding us, which we call "space." This modern perspective, viewing earth from beyond its limits, virtually **explodes** the construct, or arrangement, of earth and sky in Jewish thought. The system that the Hebrew faithful developed over a couple of thousand years placed the land, the firm earth (*terra firma*), as the **foundation** of the world. Waters lay beneath the land, or earth, and there were waters above in the heavens. So, rather than having water cycle from earth's surface to the atmosphere and back, this Jewish construct confined waters below and waters above.

We know that this description in Hebrew thought is **not a scientific rendering** of the earth, the sky, the center of our planet, or our solar system. And, we need to remind ourselves that nearly all **Reformed traditions** hold that the *Bible* is a book of recorded stories, faithfully told and written, that reflect the unique relationship of God with this thing we call life and the world. Often, we need reminding that the stories of the *Bible* are not science and never have been. Instead, with so many contributors over thousands of years the *Bible* is a storehouse of **God's Word** and God's **activity** among humans. It is such a remarkable work that nothing comes close to its depth or its **varieties of expressions** about God. In effect, human beings wrote the stories of the *Bible* from a theological perspective about truths learned from, and of, God.

So, when we come across a description of the **Ascension of the Lord**, or the Transfiguration of the Lord, or the **resurrection** of the Lord, we are pretty well going to “blow up” if we try to make it into a video recording of a news event. We need to look into the **mystery** that is described in these verses. Granted there are items and cues that we would like to see or understand. But, we have to approach these amazing and wondrous events in a way that puts the **analysis aside**, leaving us open to the wonder and awe of **God’s power** and the underlying message described 2000 years ago: **God’s Word** which speaks to us today.

Well, even if we are not in awe of this portion of scripture, the events were rather astounding to the disciples. In fact, they were caught **staring up** continuously into the sky as **two men** in white appear before them. Obviously, these are agents of God. Intentionally, there are two of them, just as there were two persons at the tomb. This is significant, because in Jewish law, **testimony** was only valid or reliable if there were at least **two witnesses** to the event.

So, the writer of *Acts* remained consistent in tying together two related stories about the Risen Christ. In this follow-up installment to the *Gospel of Luke*, which very likely was written by the same individual, we have two volumes which are intended to be read and studied together. In addition, this should be done in the proper sequence that we have them in the *Bible*. Likely, you remember that the opening address in both books is directed to **Theophilus**, possibly a real person, but very likely a “John Doe” among the educated persons in this time, about **three decades** following the resurrection of Jesus. Literally, the name Theophilus means **God-lover**. And, that could describe anyone, from a Roman citizen and senator to a Greek merchant hanging out at the local synagogue.

Regardless, this story is set precisely at **forty days** after the resurrection to mark a significant event: **Christ is taken away** from earth after these comments. Forty days is a familiar portion of time in Hebrew scripture. There are the forty days in the **wilderness** for Jesus. And, we may recall the forty years of the **wilderness journey** of Moses and Israel. This setting in *Acts* is dramatically important, but also historically **significant**: It provides a dramatic end to the **earth-bound role of Christ** among the Jewish people, the Gentiles, the disciples, and all the other followers of his ministry.

Through this event, **Christ rose** above the Earth and **returned to God**, “Who reigns above,” as the old hymn reminds us. So, Christ may be present with us spiritually, but Christ has returned bodily to **full power** with God. As we will see later in *Acts*, the presence of God will remain as the **Holy Spirit**. And, at **Pentecost** the Spirit will **descend on the disciples** and all the followers of Christ in a very, very big way.

In the *Book of Acts*, Jesus has been among the disciples, teaching them. We have no details of this, except that new power and abilities will come to them. Then, Christ departs abruptly astounding the disciples! They take in the **Ascension of the Lord**, but hardly know what to do: They are still looking up when two heavenly beings provide witness to the event and further inform the disciples that **Christ will return** one day.

Now, most of us tie the return of Christ to descriptions of **end times**. But, notice that Jesus provides no details about his return at all. And, the witnesses leave it “open ended,” as well. So, the discussion of apocalypse and visions and cosmic battles will have to wait for another day and time.

So, that leaves us at the end of this time together, in which we hold a **special observance** of the Ascension of the Lord. The scripture, the images, and the subject matter could be **confusing** for us, as if worship and religion and **theology** were not confusing enough. However, this scripture lesson reveals an interesting aspect of the **Trinity** for us. Among **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit** (or, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer), we witness a **transition** involving Christ, returning to a heavenly realm with God. No matter your view of the Trinity or of the Risen Christ or of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, God was revealing the disruptive entry of **God's kingdom** as a reality here among us. Clouds form, voices proclaim, the Spirit descends, and **Christ ascends**.

This last event left the disciples **looking up**. We can see that as wonder and **amazement**, just as the disciples did. On the other hand, we use that same phrase of “looking up” to express optimism, confidence in the future: That in a word is **Hope**. No matter what we experience or analyze or rationalize about life, **faith**, or the state of the world, Christ through God's love **extends** that hope to each and **every one** of us.

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