

June 5, 2011
Luke 24:44-53

“The Ascension for Us”

Rev. William Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

Today we celebrate Ascension Day. The Ascension of Christ occurs 40 days after the resurrection. It is recognized by Christians as the day Jesus, in his resurrected form, transitioned to his eternal home with God in heaven.

Christian visual art has attempted to express this mysterious event in almost cartoon-like form. In one picture, we see Jesus suspended in the air, floating upward like something from the movie “This is the End.” In another the artist will show the disciples standing on a hilltop, straining their neck to look up. Above them we see a large cloud in the sky with a pair of bare feet sticking out of the bottom of the cloud. Voila! Ascension!

I find myself chuckling at attempts to depict such a mystery but they reveal how challenging it is to try to grasp this story. What might the Ascension mean to us? What lies below the literal level of this story that can help us understand God?

If we look deeper we begin to see Christ’s Ascension is about rising above our circumstances. The Ascension teaches we are filled with a divine courage which helps us respond to pain, sorrow, suffering, and injustice... with the best God has put in us.

Since most of us are not going to soar above Forest Home Avenue anytime soon, or disappear into the clouds, let’s see if we can unpack this story for those of us who are the grounded followers of this ascended Savior.

In those days, so much had happened that the disciples’ heads were spinning. In less than a month and a half Jesus had been tried, condemned, crucified, then 3 days later the women found the empty tomb. Within hours after that people started claiming Jesus appeared to them; he spoke with them, he walked with them, he ate with them, he offered his wounded hand for them to touch. Now, then less than 6 weeks later he is ascending to be with God. It all happened so fast.

Sitting here today have had a couple millennia to sort it out, but in the first century the events were unfolding at the speed of light. Almost immediately conspiracy theories began swirling around about the resurrection. Some doubters suggested the women went to the wrong tomb and that is why it was empty. Others said the disciples had stolen the body to make it look like Jesus was alive again. Confusion was multiplied by claims that those who said they met Jesus in his resurrected form were delirious. So, in today’s story, one last time before Jesus leaves them... He shares this story to rehearse for his followers the foundations of his life, ministry, death and resurrection.

And in the weeks and years to come those disciples will finally put it all together. They will understand Christ’s mission and form a community which will become a home base from which

they will spread the Good News of God's love and forgiveness far and wide. They will travel many miles to preach, teach, and heal; they will write many letters, some of which are included in the bible. And in that time they will understand that resurrection is the central piece, the idea of dying to old ways of living and rising to the gift of God's new life... resurrection is foundational to the faith of those who follow Christ.

Through the ascension, Jesus turns us into storytellers. No longer are we followers who merely sit at his feet and soak up the good news. We are called to share our stories of God's resurrecting love in our life, our community and our world.

We each have stories of the goodness of strangers. We have stories of unexpected healing and experiences of wholeness in the face of suffering. We have stories of beauty rising from tragedy. We have stories of goodbyes that led to wonderful hellos; and endings that led to new glorious new beginnings. We have stories of God's transforming love in our life. We have stories of how God brought us over, around, through, or how God simply held us above when we were sinking in quicksand. We have stories of God, helping us rise above.

This week I read a story of a time Shekira Farrell's son with autism became restless while visiting a beauty supply store with her. When they arrived at the store, Farrell knew her son was restless and hungry and remained patient with him as he touched things in the store and ran through the aisles.

She said, "He couldn't really help it and wasn't trying to cause trouble, and I knew that, so I was going after him and trying to calm him down and put the items back in their right place." Farrell expected an employee from the store to stare or say something critical when they saw what Jaiden was doing since she has experienced similar reactions in the past. Instead, one employee surprised her.

When Jaiden went to the sunglasses and kept touching them, the employee approached him calmly, and asked him to put them on so she could see how cool he looked. He got so happy and quickly put them on. Farrell described the employee held a mini "fashion show" for Jaiden, letting him pose as she snapped photos and complimented him and his sunglasses. Thanks to a kind woman, 6-year-old Jaiden made a "new friend" who helped him through a meltdown at a beauty supply store.

Farrell said Jaiden cried when he had to leave his "new friend." The next Sunday, though, he got to see her again because he and his mom visited and brought her chocolate ice cream. Jaiden had remembered it was her favorite flavor.

"People on the outside looking in tend to be quick to judge and stare, they even get upset and rude," she said. "One person even called my son 'bad' during one of his meltdowns... the lack of understanding is so unfortunate, because in those moments, an autistic child is not bad, they are suffering."

So today, as we celebrate Christ's Ascension, and acknowledge the mighty power of God to help us rise above... Jesus passes his mantle and directs his followers to proclaim repentance and forgiveness wherever we go. He calls us to the work of lifting each other from our suffering, sorrow and pain.

You and I have a story to tell!

I hope each of us find ways to share the good news of God's love in our life, which is ultimately the Good News of God's love everywhere; trusting our stories are infused by The Holy Spirit, God's constant assurance that we are not alone.

Amen