

Series Title: “To Be Continued . . .”

17 May 2015: Ascension Sunday

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

“Up and Away”—*Preaching Text: Acts 1:1-11*

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Humor is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humor;
for a subject which will not bear raillery is suspicious,
and a jest which will not bear serious examination is false wit (Aristotle).

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Although to be technical, The Ascension of the Lord Day was last Thursday, 14 May 2015, we are celebrating this Ascension Day in worship today. We try to understand what Jesus’ ascension is all about. Hear the day’s lesson, Acts 1:1-11:

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 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. 4 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; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 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.” 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 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” (Acts 1:1-11).

Something puzzled me when I first started studying the Bible more seriously than simply as a casual reader. I noticed that there are two texts about the Ascension of Jesus. One version is in Luke 24 and another, but not identical Ascension version is in Acts 1—our lesson for today. If we assume Luke wrote the Gospel bearing his name and Acts, as I do, then why does Luke tell

the story twice? And why does he not tell it precisely the same way? I think Luke is doing what many ancient writers did. As Luke begins the second installment that we call Acts, Luke reviews the end of the Jesus story found in Luke's Gospel. That is, Luke tells the story of God's work first in the life of Jesus and then in the life of the early church in Acts. Thus, in a way the Ascension of Jesus is a hinge for Luke between the story in the Gospel and the story of the early church in Acts.

This hinge between the Gospel of Luke and Acts completes the forty day period of Jesus' resurrection appearances and is one of many distinctive Lucan contributions to the Gospel's story about Jesus. We might wonder why this story is so important that it compels Luke not only to tell it once but twice. Two ideas about Jesus and his relationship with us—Jesus' current disciples—occur to me.

First, Jesus' ascension completes Jesus' enthronement as God's Messiah. Each Sunday we say in our Apostles' Creed: "The third day He arose again from the dead." Then we further recite: He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

Thus, Jesus becomes the Christ of God—the Messiah king—living in power at the right hand of God (see also Psalm 110:1, Acts 2:34-36; 7:55). So the ascension story helps us recognize that God enthrones Jesus as king of glory at the right hand.

The second idea comes to us like this: Jesus physical ascension is vital for the condition of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus can only be physically present in one place at a time. Yet Jesus' presence in and as the Holy Spirit can continually be everywhere. In other words, if Jesus goes up, then the spirit comes down. It is part of Jesus' promise to his disciples and followers.

Jesus also gives the disciples a mission even after he declines to give them a time-table. They ask: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" But Jesus' response is firm: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own

authority.” But Jesus continues and tells them that “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (v. 8). This means that although these disciples do not have a timetable to possess—or turn into an idol, Jesus gives them a mission task to fulfill.

As he said this “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.” Luke also shares the story of the women at the tomb in a similar way. It is humorous if we think about the disciples staring up into the sky and the two men in white robes say to them, “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.” They are looking up, but according to these two men that is not where they will find Jesus. This saying could mean many things. First-rate scholars venture that Luke refers here to Daniel 7:13 which reads:

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

But maybe . . . the two robed characters suggest that by staring into the clouds the disciples look for Jesus in the wrong place. What is true of Jesus is not that he is up there so much as he is down here where disciples typically find Jesus—among the temple teachers—or more likely among those who need him most—the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, or those in prison (see Matthew 25:44).

One of my great faith heroes was Harry Denman (1893-1976). As a chief Methodist evangelist of an earlier era, I prize the story Mr. Denman told illustrating what it meant to have your head in the clouds and your feet on the ground.

It seems that Denman attended a Methodist General Conference that debated what the general church ought and could do about adult literacy—or lack thereof. The General Conference debated for a long time. The Conference tried to estimate how much money a national effort to wipe out illiteracy would cost . . . and who would be in charge of raising funds. On and on the

deliberative queries went. This is what it looks like to have your head in the clouds.

Then Denman returned home from the General Conference to First Methodist Church in Birmingham, AL. As he went in the church's back door he noticed an elderly African-American custodian sitting on the back steps teaching a nineteen year old youngster how to read. That picture, friends, is what Mr. Denman said it looks like to have one's feet planted on the ground. From time to time it is good to look up like the disciples did and let Jesus inspire us. But sometimes it is better to simply look around and see about filling a need in someone's life—like Jesus did so often.

As aspiring disciples, it is easy to get caught with our head in the clouds. But for those who want to serve a master who said “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master” (Matthew 10:24). Therefore those who aspire to be like the ascended Christ will do what Jesus did and go back to work—that is after staring upward for a while.