

2 Kings 2:1-14

Acts 1:1-14

May 28, 2017

The Ascension of the Lord

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

SIDEWAYS IS THE NEW UP

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In 1982, Crosby, Stills, and Nash sang,

*When you see the Southern Cross for the first time
You understand now why you came this way
'Cause the truth you might be runnin' from is so small
But it's as big as the promise, the promise of a comin' day.*

Who did see the Southern Cross constellation for the first time? Well, the absolutely correct answer to that question is “Who knows?” From a Euro-centric point of view, the traditional answer is the Italian explorer and navigator, Amerigo Vespucci, on his third voyage in 1501.¹ Of course, Vespucci wasn’t the only one on his ship, so maybe it’s not even accurate to say Vespucci was the first European explorer to see the Southern Cross. Then again, he was the captain of the voyage, so he gets the credit.

I saw the Southern Cross, called “Crux,” for the first time on Saturday, June 22, 2013, and it was magnificent. I was standing in Dustin and Sherri Ellington’s backyard in Lusaka, Zambia at about 4:45 a.m. We were getting ready to drive about three hours to take our boat trip on the Zambezi River. The night sky was beautiful and there was hardly any light pollution. It dawned on me that the sky looked different from the night sky at home. Then Dustin walked over, pointed to the sky, and said, “There’s the Southern Cross. You can’t see that back in the States.”

As I remembered that experience, it got me thinking about what it means to talk about “up” and “down.” If somehow I could have risen straight up in the air from the Ellingtons’ backyard that early Saturday morning, would I have ended up in the same place as if I had done the same thing from my own backyard on Friendly Drive in Wallace, NC? That sounds like a silly question, but it’s worth thinking about as we hear today’s story about Jesus being lifted up and taken out of the disciples’ sight by a cloud.

Even though we’re using a different Affirmation of Faith today, we affirm it almost every Sunday morning in worship: “the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

But why do we say “up” when we talk about heaven? Maybe it’s because we are filled with awe when we look up into the night sky and see all of the beautiful stars. Maybe it’s because the Bible talks so much about God’s people meeting God “up on the mountain.” Maybe it has something to do with reaching up and beyond our lives that are so firmly planted on the earth below. Maybe it has to do with some sense of hierarchy, with God being on top, in charge, all-powerful. Maybe it’s a holdover from

an ancient worldview that thought of creation as three-layered – the earth, what’s under the earth, and the skies/heavens above the earth. Listen to what we are going to say in this morning’s Affirmation of Faith from Philippians 2:9-10: “Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Talking about Jesus ascending into heaven, going up, is our way of affirming that Jesus Christ is Lord.

When the Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, became the first human being to go into space, it was widely reported that he said, “I went up to space, but I didn’t encounter God.” However, it turns out that Gagarin, a baptized and devout member of the Russian Orthodox Church, probably never said anything like that. In fact, Nikita Khrushchev uttered that famous line in a speech to the Central Committee in Moscow, and then put the words in Yuri Gagarin’s mouth. Gagarin’s close friend, Valentin Petrov, a professor at the Russian Air Force Academy, said he heard Gagarin say on numerous occasions, “An astronaut cannot be suspended in space and not have God in his mind and in his heart.”²

What sense does it make to us 21st century Christians to talk about Jesus ascending into heaven? We have a completely different worldview and understanding of cosmology from believers in the 1st century A.D.

Geographically and spatially, maybe it doesn’t make much sense to talk about “going **up** to heaven.” However, theologically it is very important to affirm that “he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” “Jesus going up” affirms that the Jesus who died on the cross and was raised again from the dead now rules as Lord over all. “Jesus going up” looks back to the glory of his transfiguration, with the mountain and the cloud and Elijah and the brilliant white clothing. “Jesus going up” looks forward to what the disciples are called to do, now that Jesus is absent in a physical presence but always present in the power of his Holy Spirit. “Jesus going up” has been called the “hinge point” of Luke’s two volume work of his gospel and his book of the acts of the apostles. “Jesus going up” is the end of Jesus’ earthly presence and the beginning of Jesus’ spiritual presence.

Ancient Celtic Christian tradition speaks of “thin places,” where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we can catch a glimpse of the divine. One travel writer puts it this way, “The divine supposedly transcends time and space, yet we seek it in very specific places and at very specific times. If God is everywhere and ‘everywhen,’ as the Australian aboriginals put it wonderfully, then why are some places thin and others not. Why isn’t the whole world thin? Maybe it is but we’re too thick to recognize it. Maybe thin places offer glimpses not of heaven but of earth as it really is, unencumbered. Unmasked.”³

“Maybe it is but we’re too thick to recognize it. . .” That reminds me of the two men in white robes rebuking the disciples who must have been standing there with their necks craned and their jaws dropped: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (Acts 1:11) The men/angels imply the disciples ought to be

looking somewhere else, going somewhere else, doing something else, than standing rooted in one spot.

Before Jesus “went up,” his disciples asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They were calculating the dates and times, they were rooted in their old way of thinking about what God was up to in Jesus Christ. Someone has said that we have far too many heaven gazers and not enough true disciples. We are more concerned about when the Lord will come again than about what we should be doing in the meantime now that he has **already** come once. It’s the “danger of looking high when Jesus asks us to look low at the people he has come to redeem.”

Today’s sermon title, “Sideways Is the New Up,” comes from a poem by Rick Fry. The phrase caught my attention because it sounds kind of like the TV show, “Orange Is the New Black.” I didn’t really know what that meant, so I looked it up and found out it comes from the fashion industry/pop culture, in which black is the color that will go with anything. So “_____ is the new black” means some other color/some other thing is now common and versatile. The TV title refers to the orange jumpsuits worn in the prison in the series.

“Sideways Is the New Up” helps us think about what “Jesus going up” in his ascension means for us as believers and followers in this time between Jesus coming once and Jesus coming again. Rick Fry writes:

*You lifted your nail pierced hands over the disciples,
And blessed them.
And as you blessed them you went up,
Way up.
The crucified one was exulted
And glorified in heaven.
Yet heaven is where God is,
And God is where our neighbor is,
And our neighbor is behind us and in front,
To the left, right, diagonal, and sideways.
So sideways is the new up.
We discover your glorified presence
In the thickness of life around us.
And you trust us to carry on the mission that you began,
With a promise that we will be
Clothed with power from on high.
It’s a power that we possess only by giving it away
For the sake of our sister and brother –
A power strong enough to stand with them,
Deep in hurt and sorrow,
In grief and longing,
In pain and sickness and doubt.*

*You trust us enough
To bless us for such work.⁴*

“Sideways is the new up” keeps “Jesus going up” from being too other-worldly or irrelevant to our modern lives. “He ascended into heaven” means Jesus is Lord. And, if Jesus is Lord, that means he is the only true Lord. And, if Jesus is the only true Lord, that means Jesus-gone-up is Lord of our entire life, not just our worship-life and church-life and prayer-life and spirit-life.

The Day of Ascension is forty days after Easter, so it never falls on a Sunday. Actually, it was last Thursday, May 25. Ascension Day doesn’t get much attention in most churches, and that’s too bad. “Jesus going up” is an important companion to our resurrection celebration on Easter Sunday. In both cases, the gospel writers make sure we understand that the risen Lord Jesus in all of his glory is the same Jesus who was crucified in shame. The two can’t be separated – not in Jesus’ life, not in our faith. Because we don’t highlight Ascension Day much in our church, I looked up what Presbyterians believe about the ascension and, no great surprise, found an excerpt from the *Companion to the Book of Common Worship* titled “Christ is Lord.” Near the end you read, “Christ’s ascension, therefore, concerns us not only with ecclesiastical matters but also with social and political ones. With the raising of Christ to a position above all worldly powers, the earthly ministry of Christ begun at Christmas’s incarnation now concludes. The path of faithfulness obediently followed by Christ traveled through the suffering of the cross to the exaltation of the glory. From glory to suffering to glory again is the shape of Jesus’ ministry as well as ours. We, too, are destined for the glory we share now in Christ only by faith. ‘It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him’ (1 John 3:2)”⁵

The Crux constellation in the Southern Hemisphere, the Southern Cross, is made up of four stars, two of which are of first-magnitude brightness. The longer bar of the cross points almost exactly toward the South Pole. Navigators in the Southern Hemisphere use the Southern Cross as navigators in the Northern Hemisphere use the North Star and the Big Dipper. The constellation gets its name because of the formation of the four stars – a formation that is called “cruciform,” the shape of a cross.

“Jesus going up,” his ascension into heaven, says a lot about his Lordship over all of life. “Jesus going up” also says a lot to us about leading a cruciform life. Think about the shape of a cross. The long vertical arm points us up to God, and tells us to love God with all our heart, mind, strength, and soul. The shorter horizontal arm of the cross – the arm upon which our Lord Jesus stretched out his arms for the whole world – points us out to our neighbors, and tells us to love them as we love ourselves.

When it comes to living for God in obedience to the One who has been exalted and given the name that is above every name, maybe sideways really is the new up.

*When you see the cross of Jesus for the first time,
You understand now why you came this way
It's as big as the promise, the promise of a comin' day.*

Let us pray: Fill us with your Spirit, Risen and Ascended Lord Jesus Christ. Restore your kingdom in our lives, that we might know you more, trust you more, serve you more fully. Fill us with your Spirit that we might wait for you, and in so doing, see you at work in our work, and find ourselves drawn to you; to the glory of your name. Amen.

NOTES

¹Joe Rao, "Exploring the Famous Southern Cross Constellation," May 19, 2015 at www.space.com.

²"Yuri Gagarin, first human in space, was a devout Christian, says his close friend," at www.beliefnet.com.

³Eric Weiner, "Where Heaven and Earth Come Close," March 9, 2012 at www.nytimes.com.

⁴Rick Fry, "Sideways Is the New Up," at www.rickfry130.wordpress.com.

⁵"Ascension of the Lord," at www.presbyterianmission.org.