

Going Up!  
Acts 1:1-11  
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I have a story to tell you, and I want to see if it's familiar to you. A wise and powerful being comes to earth to make his dwelling among us mortal humans. He develops a small following of people who are unimportant to the world, outside the power structure, including women and children. He performs miracles and healings. He is then hunted down by the ruling powers, who finally end up taking him captive. He dies, is resurrected, and then ascends back to the heavens as his earth-bound friends look upward, gazing at the sky.

Of course, I'm talking about "E.T. the Extraterrestrial." That movie, which came out in 1982, was a defining moment for my generation. I'll never forget in that very last scene, when E.T. is about to board his spaceship. He goes to each of the three children and gives them a message to remember. When he comes to Eliot, the boy with whom E.T. had such a strong connection, he puts his glowing finger on Eliot's heart and says, "I'll be right here." (Sniffle!) And then, E.T. boards his spaceship and goes home.

Our passage from Acts today might not have the same emotional appeal or the special effects, but there are a lot of similarities. Just think what Spielberg could do with this story! In a world that needs a savior, a baby is born..." Like E.T., Jesus has been persecuted by authorities, he's died, been resurrected, and is now ready to go home to his Father in heaven. But before he ascends, he has some marching orders to share with the disciples. After doing so, we are told he was "lifted up," and a cloud took him out of their sight. This is his last earthly appearance. This moment is the culmination of all that Jesus had done and said in scripture. This is the Ascension.

So why don't we pay any attention to it? This story is incredibly important because it's the bridge between the Resurrection and the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. Before we get there, we first have to tie up the loose ends in Jesus' story, like the fact that he's been resurrected and is walking around making appearances. Now what? Is he just going to keep doing this forever? Two thousand years after the first Easter would Jesus still be walking the earth, popping up here and there? "Honey, you'll never guess who I saw at Target today?" Bob?" "Nope!" "Linda?" Guess again!" "Resurrected Jesus?" "Yep! I invited him to the BBQ next week. He loves to play cornhole!" Of course not! So we have this story at the beginning of Acts about Jesus' ascension, which sets the stage for the disciples to take up the torch and continue God's work.

I think I know why we don't really focus on Ascension Sunday. It's because what is acknowledged on Ascension Sunday is that fact that Jesus left us; it's the day the present Lord became absent. Who wants to celebrate being left behind? Do we really need a day commemorating Christ's absence from us? We get too many reminders of that on regular days, divorce days, diagnosis days, death-by-a-thousand-paper-cuts days, days when Jesus doesn't feel as close to us as we would like. We want him around, popping up here and there when we need him. We know all too well what it feels like when Jesus is absent from us. Today's story reminds us he's gone, he's no longer with us, and that's not something to celebrate.

Celebrating Jesus' absence is one of the many paradoxes of faith. A paradox is defined as "a statement that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality expresses a possible truth." That pretty much sums up our entire belief system, doesn't it? Think how absurd this gathering must look to outsiders. A large group of people gather week after week with no intention of

doing anything productive. What's going on here? A brouhaha? A kerfuffle? The main leaders put on a dress – even the guys! - we sit and face a huge instrument of torture, we close our eyes and talk as if there's someone there. We eat a small piece of bread and drink a thimble of grape juice and claim it's some dead guy's body and blood. We declare things we can't prove and make promises we don't always keep to a God we can't see. Does that sound a bit absurd?

But remember the other part of the definition of paradox: “a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd...but in reality expresses a possible truth.” A possible truth. Can we say a definitive truth? Not definitively. Do we really know that we know *that we know* what we believe is true? No. But I'm willing to stake my life on the possibility that God is real. I believe what I know about God is true, that God is present with us, and one of the reasons I believe that is because of what happens on Ascension Sunday.

What Acts does, particularly these first 14 verses, is it completes Jesus' story and fulfills God's promises. It reminds us that what God begins, God completes. What God promises, God fulfills. This episode brings closure to the story of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, and prepares the way for the fulfilling of the next promise. Jesus says in John's gospel, “If you love me you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth.” That's what happens on Pentecost, the reminder that Jesus told us, “I'll be right here.”

But we're not there yet. We only have to wait a couple weeks, but the disciples had to wait 40 days. Forty days in between Jesus ascending and the Holy Spirit coming. If you've ever had to wait for something that's important, you know that's a loooong time. No wonder they stood there looking up at the sky! I would, too. In a sense, ever since the Ascension we've been looking up, waiting for a glimpse of God, waiting for Jesus to return and set things right. We're living in what theologian Karl Barth called “the significant pause,” the time in between Jesus' first and second coming, the time where we wait with expectant hope for God to do what God has promised. And until then, we stand with the disciples, looking up and wondering and asking, “Now what?”

Now what, indeed. I've heard that question asked many times. Now what? The person I thought would always be around is no longer around. Now what? That security I thought I would always have is gone. Now what? The child I thought would always need me is off on their own. Now what? Sometimes the assurance of Jesus' presence slips from our hands like a child's balloon that ascends to the heavens. And we're left behind to ask, “Now what?”

God heard the disciples' hearts crying out that question, because God provides an answer in the form of two angels who offer a gentle reproof: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?” In other words, “Don't just stand there; do something!” Jesus spent three years doing ministry among these disciples, teaching them and listening to them and forgiving them and empowering them. He has been preparing them for this moment, when the reins of this fledgling religious group would be handed over to them. It's time to stop looking up and start looking around. As I heard one pastor say it, “Don't look for Jesus in the heights; look for him in the depths.” The depths of human life, the deep, dark places in the world, that's where the disciples will now find him.

So as we sit here this morning, experiencing the paradox of Sunday worship, I wonder if we are guilty of the same neck-craning as the disciples. Are we sitting here looking up, waiting for a concrete sign from the heavens, putting God's work on hold until we get some sort of confirmation that this paradox of Christianity is more than just a possible truth? Are we hoping to experience a presence that would make sense of the feelings of absence, a definitive,

incontrovertible truth to counteract the absurdity of life? Are we holding back until we know that we know that we know this whole faith thing is true?

If we are, that's OK. I believe all of us go through times when that's all we have to offer, simply to be here with our craned necks and our quizzical looks. That's the challenge of having faith. The reality of life is that there will be times when Christ feels absent, when we live in the "significant pause" between Christ's appearances here on earth. But if we only spend our time looking up, I think we've lost the plot. Unlike the disciples, we don't have the benefit of three years of teaching from Jesus, but we have something else to prove he is real. We have this church. We have God's word. We have the bread and the cup. We have each other. This place is our training ground, where we can hear about and practice grace and forgiveness and loving each other, even the ones we don't like, so that we can take those things into the world. But if the extent of our faith – our scripture reading, our praying, our talking about justice and inclusion and being Christ-like – if all of that starts and ends here, we're just looking up.

As I was researching this sermon, I came across a painting of the Ascension. In it, Jesus is about three stories up and the disciples are all staring at him. And I saw the most peculiar thing in this painting. On the ground, where Jesus was just standing moments before, are a set of footprints, a reminder that Jesus was here, that his body was real, that it took up space on this earth. Jesus left footprints here.

I believe we are called to come here and look up so that we can go out there and look around, so that we can be the footprints of Jesus, the tangible sign of his existence in this world. We come here each week to listen and to sing and to taste, to be reminded of who we are and who we're called to be so we can go out and live that call. We come here to pray so we can go out there and witness. There's nothing wrong with looking up, with seeking God's face and waiting with hope. But if we only look up, if we don't then live out what we believe is true, we're missing the presence of Christ that's already here, in our midst.

The answer to "now what" – in our faith and in our culture – is the church, reaching out to comfort the afflicted, to be a companion to the lonely, to confront evil, to speak a word of truth, to leave footprints in his name. Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor says about this story, "It's almost as if Jesus had not ascended but exploded, so that all of the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, so that the seeds of heaven were sown over the fields of the earth." The Ascension isn't a story about Christ's absence. It's a story about Christ's presence with us in all times and all places, including right here, right now. "I'll be right here." But he's not just here, he's out there, in the depths. Let's go see if we can find him. And where we don't find him, let's be him to others.