

**What Came Down Must Go Up**  
**Acts 1:6-14**

This past Thursday was the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Easter which means it was the Day of Ascension. It's never been a big day for Presbyterians and our ilk. If you were a Roman Catholic, it is a holy day of obligation – that is, the church expects its members to attend Mass that day. Free-spirited that we are, we take a pass and, in reality, probably didn't even take note of it.

Maybe the reason is that unlike Christmas and Easter which are festivals that make us feel good, the Day of Ascension is more likely to make us uncomfortable. For many of us, it taxes our credulity. Did Jesus really take off from planet earth like some rocket thrust into outer space, or did he simply disappear and was no longer with his disciples as he was for those 40 days after Easter? If Jesus simply disappeared, then what is this story all about? The language of ascendancy was for the first century and still is for us, language that connotes authority and supremacy. We talk about “going to the head of the class” or “ascending to the highest office in the land.” This story affirms that Jesus is Lord, not just of the disciples, not just of Israel, not just of the church, not just of the world, but he is Lord of the universe. What better picture to affirm that, especially for a first century mind, than Jesus being lifted up until he was enveloped by the clouds?

That's why the Apostles' Creed, from the early history of the church, reads: “[Jesus] ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.” That's why one of the most recent Confessions of Faith also reads: “We believe that God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of human life...It is the will of God that his purpose for human life shall be fulfilled under the rule of Christ and all evil be banished from God's creation.”<sup>i</sup>

Does the ascension of Jesus really mean that he claims authority over every aspect of our lives? Well, yeah!

Yesterday morning, Langdon and I met with those whom you elected last week as elders and deacons. We read these words from the very first paragraph of the Form of Government, part of our church's Constitution:

“All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body.”<sup>iii</sup>

“The whole of human life,” “all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named,” *all things* are under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If you are one who likes to compartmentalize your life – keeping your religion a nice, tidy, private affair that never intersects with the way you live, the way you relate to your loved ones, the way you do your job, the way you relate to your coworkers, the way you vote on election day – those words may make you nervous.

Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of Great Britain, was quoted last week as saying:

One of the oddest questions I get asked in interviews, and I get asked a lot of questions, is: Is faith important to your politics? It's like asking someone whether their health is important to them or their family. If you are someone 'of faith,' it is the focal point of belief in your life. There is no conceivable way that it wouldn't affect your politics.<sup>iii</sup>

Obviously all Christians don't understand Jesus in precisely the same way and they come to different conclusions about life issues, including politics. We have to accept that. Better to have different understandings about how to live life than never to wrestle with the meaning of our faith, or never to try to make a connection between our faith and how we live.

The story continues that as the Apostles were gazing up at the sky, a couple of angels jolted them back to reality by asking, **"Why are you standing there looking up at the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."**

Christians live between the time of Christ's first coming and the time of God's final triumph. It has become a very long time of waiting. But we are not called to passive waiting. No standing around with your hands in your pockets, looking up in the sky. Real faith is not waiting around for Jesus to return and tidy up our messy world. Real faith "shares God's labor of healing the enmities which separate us from God and from one another."<sup>iv</sup> Real faith knows that our efforts alone cannot bring in God's kingdom, but it "plunges us into the struggle for victories over evil that are possible now in the world, the church, and our individual lives."<sup>v</sup>

An old rabbi was once asked why so few people were finding God. He wisely replied that people are not willing to look that low. If Jesus will return in the same way he mysteriously left, maybe that means he disappears into the present moment in many ways we seldom recognize. **"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."**<sup>vi</sup>

Real religion is, according to the letter of James, **"to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."**<sup>vii</sup> That is, real religion is **"to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."**<sup>viii</sup> We acknowledge our Lord's authority over our lives and all of life not by piously gazing up to the sky but by getting to work and bearing witness, in word and deed, to the uttermost ends of the earth.

The very first thing the Apostles do when the angels bring them back to reality is to devote themselves to prayer and to organize the life of the church, beginning with the task of finding someone to replace Judas.

Devotion to prayer doesn't seem very action oriented. But it is the best spring board for action. If we want be empowered as God's instruments to do God's will, then the first thing we should do when we take our hands out of our pockets and stop looking up is to fold our hands and bow in prayer.

Henri Nouwen writes,

We have fallen into the temptation of separating ministry from spirituality, service from prayer. Our demon says: 'We are too busy to pray; we have too many needs to attend to, too many people to respond to, too many wounds to heal.' But to think this way is harmful... Service and prayer can never be separated; they are related to each other as the Yin and Yang of the Japanese Circle.<sup>ix</sup>

Some time ago, while roaming around in the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes, I stumbled on the verse that is included in your bulletin.<sup>x</sup> I wrote it down thinking to myself, "someday that will preach." That day has come. I read it as this sermon in a nutshell. I included two very contemporary translations because I couldn't decide which one I liked better.

Don't sit there watching the wind. Do your own work. Don't stare at the clouds. Get on with your life. (*The Message*)

If you wait until the wind and the weather are just right, you will never plant anything and never harvest anything. (*Good News Bible*)

It's also a segue to a song first introduced to me by Jason Tucker, our former Director of Youth Ministries who is now a second year student at Princeton Theological Seminary. It's a simple song, almost chant-like, you can easily learn to sing to yourself. As you listen for a few moments, see if it isn't time for you to stop and feel the pull of the Lord – not upward into outer space, but downward, off our pedestals of self-importance, taking the role of a servant and being an instrument of God's healing grace in this hurting world. After all, servanthood was the posture of our Lord.

*The time has come ... The time is now  
To stop and feel ... The pull of the Lord.  
O Shepherd, speak to me.*

Composed and sung by Stephen Iverson

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- i. Confession of 1967, Book of Confessions, 9.53
  - ii. Book of Order, *Form of Government*, G-1.0100 Presbyterian Church (USA)
  - iii. Los Angeles Times, April 30, 2008
  - iv. Confession of 1967, Book of Confessions, 9.31
  - v. Declaration of Faith, 1977, Chapter 10, lines 77-80
  - vi. See Matthew 25:31-46, Parable of the Last Judgment
  - vii. James 1:27

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viii. Micah 6:8

ix. Henri J. M. Nouwen, The Living Reminder

x. Ecclesiastes 11:4