

“We rise in glory as we sink in pride.”
Acts 1:1-11 Luke 24:44-53

Today is Ascension Sunday. Every Sunday when we affirm the Apostles Creed and are saying what we believe about Jesus we say that we believe that after he was raised from the dead that Jesus “ascended into heaven where he is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” I would like us to think together just what that means when we say that Jesus ascended into heaven.

Last week you were blessed by the preaching of our beloved Dr Newton Greiner. I am very grateful to have him as a colleague and brother in Christ as I know that you are as well. Christine and I were visiting with our daughter up in Atlanta. During our visit we had two experiences that spoke to me about what the Ascension of Jesus into heaven might mean for us who are called to live by faith as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Besides visiting our daughter the occasion of this visit was to celebrate my 60th birthday. (1948 was a very good year as I know at least three members of our church that were also born in that same year.) When Christine asked me what I wanted to do on my birthday I remembered a lunch that my daughter and I had shared over 20 years ago. I attended seminary at Emory University in Atlanta from 1987 through 1989. One week each semester I would bring one of my children up to seminary with me. In some ways it didn’t make any sense because I got very little studying done those weeks, but we had a lot of fun together. One week when Meredith was with me we rode MARTA downtown, and I saw this tall round hotel called the Westin Peachtree Plaza. There was a glass elevator on the outside that went all the way to the top. Meredith was a little apprehensive, but we rode the elevator to the top and we discovered that on the top floor of the hotel there was a restaurant. And this was a revolving restaurant no less!

When we got off the elevator we were greeted by the “maitre de” who asked me, “Would you like a table for two, sir?” At that time I was a starving seminary student. Our usual supper was tuna fish sandwiches with potato chips followed by a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for desert. Lunch at a revolving restaurant was not in my budget, but I quickly calculated that perhaps I could find a salad or something on the menu that we could afford just to enjoy the view. So we did.

So we re-lived that experience on this trip. The view was just as spectacular as I remember it, and even though the prices are a bit inflated we took our time and had a very leisurely meal and stretched it out for at least two complete rotations. You could see I-75 winding its way south toward Macon with Turner Field where the Braves play beside it. I-20 heads east toward Decatur and Emory University. To the northeast was Stone Mountain. To the north was Buckhead. To the west was Hartsfield Airport.

It was a great feeling of having ascended to the top! It was easy to get the feeling of being both literally and relationally above it all. I thought of that view in relationship to the Ascension. It is tempting to think of the Ascension as God's way of removing Jesus from all that he had experienced on earth.

We could think of it in this way: Jesus has accomplished his mission on earth and is now taken back to the safety of heaven, welcomed back into the embrace of the Father after having been so brutally betrayed and scornfully treated while in the realm of humankind. We could think of the Ascension as a kind of retirement as a divine reward for accomplishing a difficult mission with distinction. We might think that the Ascension of Jesus into heaven brings a kind of hope for us who are still struggling down here that there will also be a heavenly reward for us as well. But that is not it at all. The Ascension is not Jesus escaping back to safety in heaven where he will no longer be able to be molested.

But when we listen to what Jesus says we hear something different, "And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised." What is the promise of the Father? The promise of the Father is a mutual relationship. It is that God will take up residence within each of us. God will dwell within us. That is the first part, and the second part that is accomplished in the Ascension is this. The most precious part of you will also dwell within the heart of God. You, along with all humankind, along with all creation itself are cherished within the Father's heart.

Can there be any other explanation for the disciple's response to Jesus withdrawal from them? They were not saddened or grieved. They were filled with joy and they worshipped and they developed an addiction, a positive addiction I might hasten to add, to praising God. They were continually in the Temple!

The second experience we had was this. On the way to the hotel in downtown Atlanta we happened upon a small park that has a tribute to Andrew Young that has just been dedicated earlier this year. You will recall that Andrew Young was an associate of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was the first African American elected to congress from Georgia since the reconstruction. He served as the American representative to the United Nations and was a very effective two term mayor of Atlanta. One result of his leadership was that Atlanta hosted the 1996 Olympics. He is also an ordained minister. Inscribed on the granite wall of the tribute was this quote from Andrew Young that speaks very eloquently about ascension in our spiritual life. It is the title of this sermon, "We rise in glory as we sink in pride."

Jesus tells us that we must wait until we are clothed with power from on high. God's power does not happen on our schedule. It is not customized for our convenience. It is not conformed to our sense of control. It is not according to our logic, but it speaks to our deepest need to be cherished. And it asks us to become willing to surrender to the will of God in our lives.

There is a risk there. Jesus wrestled with that risk in the garden of Gethsemane when the sweating blood as he prayed, “Not what I want but what you want.” “Letting go of our pride” is becoming willing to let go of all the things that separate us from God and becoming willing to let go of all the ways we try to claim credit for our the accomplishments in this life.

Politically Andrew Young has always been a Democrat. It was illustrative to me that this tribute was encouraged and in large part financed by a Republican businessman by the name of Charles Loudermilk. It was written of him that “Mr Loudermilk never tried to buy Andrew Young’s friendship but he doesn’t mind paying for it now.” Andrew Young responded this way, “When it looks like I’m getting credit for something, I don’t know what that means. This is a way of saying thanks, not to me, but to God. The people I have admired most almost never got any credit.”¹ What a humble expression of the love of God expressed in the Ascension.

The Ascension is not a picture of a risen Christ who leaves the disciples and goes into retirement (as if the Son sinks down into the throne at the right hand of the Father and says, “Whew, am I glad that job is done!” But the Ascension can give us an eternal perspective on all our efforts.

No matter what projects we are involved with they are inevitably always at least a little incomplete. They are never completely clear in their consequences; there is always ambiguity to factor in. But if we are only the sum of the successes of our projects, we will then have to deal with the chilling reality that we are only worth what they are worth, and they pass away. All human accomplishments inevitably are reduced to dust or rust or decay.

But in his words and in his life, in his suffering and death and resurrection Jesus is calling us back to the eternity within our midst, our eternal relationship with God. Jesus teaches us that within time, within the contexts and the specifics of our lives we need to learn and we will be empowered to learn the eternal lesson to love one another, with all the social and political justice and peacemaking elements required for that love.

The Ascension is much more than just an exit strategy and wrap up of Jesus life. Jesus is lifted up in order that he can go ahead of us to get a head start on all that is left to do. Read ahead just a little in the book of Acts and you will see that the Holy Spirit is consistently out in front of the apostles. The Holy Spirit directs Philip to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch but the Spirit is already there speaking to his heart. Peter is sent to the home of the gentile Cornelius and what does he find? He finds, once he has let go his pride of what is appropriate, that he is not bringing the gospel but the Holy Spirit is already there. Paul travels to places he has never been before to people that he formerly persecuted and

¹ www.11alive.com/news on 14 April 2008

suffers great humiliation, but he experiences great joy as the Holy Spirit is alive in the lives of humble men and women. Jesus doesn't leave the disciples to retire but to go ahead on behalf of the gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He promises us a power that transcends all boundaries. The important direction is ascension is not just going up it is going up in order to go forward and to go ahead. Before his feet leave the ground Jesus speaks to his followers of the future. He points us forward in time. But his caution is to remain until we have been clothed with power from on high. We need to be comfortable and at peace in our own skin.

When he speaks of a gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins that is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations he then says, "You are witnesses to these things." We cannot witness to what we have not experienced. We need an ongoing and fresh experience of repentance in our lives, a sinking in pride as Andrew Young put it. It is a repentance that takes the risk to admit our powerlessness and vulnerability and trust God through all the season and in every circumstance of our lives as individuals as a church and as a nation.

Recently I read of a young man who is attempting to live as a disciple of Jesus in these days as a peacemaker. His name is Jonathan. A couple years ago he traveled to Iraq, not in a uniform, not with any weapons, not in the employ of any defense contractor but as a member of a Christian Peacemaker Team. He wrote these words as his witness to this nation before he left, "If we will repent, there is another way. It is not a way that we can see so long as we are advancing toward the false gods who tempt us. But if we turn (that is what it means to repent), we can see Jesus. We may not see an end to evil. But we can see Jesus. We may not see security against those who plot against us. But we can see Jesus. And when we see him, we will be like him; for we will see him as he truly is."²

In the courage of that affirmation Jonathan knows the reality of the ascension that we are not just with God and that God is not just within us but that we are in God. The Holy Spirit is the gift of God welling up in the Trinity from the common heart of the love shared between the Father and the Son and from that divine loves flows an abundance and a power that desires to overflow into every human heart. That is the source of the joy that is offered to you and me this morning right here in this place as we celebrate the Lord's Supper!

It asks of us to be willing to sink in pride so that we may be raised in glory. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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² Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove of West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship on www.jesusradicals.com