

“AS THEY STOOD THERE GAZING...”

**Text: “When he had said this, as they stood there gazing,
he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.”**

Acts 1:9

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Last Thursday, on May the First moving day, the Christian Church celebrated a couple of very important ecclesiastical holidays which went largely unnoticed in the everyday lives of God’s people here in Charlotte. For one, it was the officially Presidentially Proclaimed “National Day of Prayer”, which we did acknowledge a little bit at the Faith Group worship on Thursday Noon. (I read that President Bush’s ratings hit an all time low last week, so perhaps that is why no one else made much of a fuss.)

But it was also the Day of the Ascension of our Lord, which arrives yearly exactly forty days after Easter, when as Luke tells the story in Acts, a cloud took The Risen Christ, by then finished with his earthly tasks, up out of sight into the heavens. Then, I adore the words used in the old King James translation: his disciples stood there, puzzled and bewildered, and they were “gazing up into the sky”. It was a rather remarkable miracle if you think about it, almost always unheralded in the annals of the Presbyterian Church.

In fact it is and has been mostly unheralded almost everywhere else as well. We do mention it during our weekly recitation of the Apostles’ Creed, but I doubt that we get the full impact of what an extraordinary event occurred when we say: “He ascended to heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” Paul by the way added “At the right hand of God”, in Ephesians 1:20.

I am not sure why Ascension Day is a second class citizen of Christian holidays. There is little reference to it in modern theological writings, even if a couple of excellent studies appeared in the last half century, if you are interested: like J.G. Davies Bampton Lectures, published as He Ascended Into Heaven (Lutterworth Press) and The Resurrection and Ascension of Christ Jesus, by T.W. Doane (Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2005), neither of which is casual reading I can assure you.

Here and there over the years, the Ascension has received a nod or two of acclamation. St. Augustine, e.g., was enthusiastic about the holiday. He wrote that the original twelve apostles celebrated Ascension Day, although there is no historical evidence to support what he said. But then, who is brave enough to argue with Augustine? Not me. In the Third and Fourth Centuries there are some recorded spiritual pilgrimages to the Mount of Olives, on and from which the Ascension first occurred. In the Middle Ages there is mention of some processions of candles and banners commemorating the day, but not too much.

When Peggy and I visited Israel, we took in all the sights: The Garden Tomb, Calvary, the Via Dolorosa, Nazareth, Bethlehem and the rest. But, I also insisted that our guide take us up on the Mt. of Olives to view the spot where Our Lord ascended into heaven (Or the spot they say it was). Near Bethany there is a tiny old slightly unkempt little gazebo like structure, less than half the size of our choir loft, open with doors and windows on the sides, and of course, there is also a symbolic opening in the center of the roof. But no embellishments, no ornamentation, no tapestries, no paintings, no nothing,

just a meek little sign which reads “The Chapel of the Ascension”. It does not look like anything special happened there.

There is however in the center of the floor a stone which has what appears to be the indentation of a footprint. I almost missed it. Our guide said without enthusiasm, right out of the training manual, “That is the footprint Christ left when he pushed off into the sky.” Oh dear.

About two hours before, she had pointed out with equal reserve the footprint which Mohammed, the Founder of Islam and the Moslem faith, left behind when he pushed off to ascend into heaven six centuries later. Mohammed ascended into heaven, it is believed by Islam, over at the Dome of the Rock, now a Muslim Temple up above the Wailing Wall. It gets a little more complicated when out on the road from Jerusalem down to Bethlehem you see a building commemorating the spot where the Old Testament prophet, Elijah, ascended directly into heaven, as his student Elisha looked on (2 Kings 2).

Going directly into heaven without dying is not all that uncommon in Bible, nor of course, in ancient mythology. It appears in Genesis where “Enoch walked with God” and “he did not see death”. (cf. Genesis 5:23-24, and Hebrews 11:5). In the last book of the Bible, if you take it literally, John writes of the two Witnesses who were dead for three and one-half days. Then the breath of life came into them and they arose and a voice from heaven said, “Come up here! And they went directly up into heaven in a cloud, while their enemies watched them.” (Revelation 11:11-12) That would be nice, wouldn't it; after your enemies beat you up and killed you, you could float up above them and wave back as you ascend into heaven.

I do not mention these other stories of ascensions to belittle the story in Luke 1. Just to let you know that I am aware it is not as singular an event as we might think on first reading it. And anyway, the God who can make the earth out of nothing, and who created human life from scratch, can surely handle death and ascension into heaven as He chooses.

Last Thursday in the Roman Catholic and other high liturgical churches, the Paschal Candle which had been burning since Easter Sunday was extinguished, on Ascension Day. (We went there one better: our Paschal Candle here at Sharon went out all by itself last Sunday during the Sacrament of Baptism.) In some out of the way churches in Italy a statue of

Jesus is literally raised up through a specially prepared hole in the roof each year to reproduce our Lord's departure up into heaven. (That would be impressive and memorable; although I do not think Charles Murray and his facilities committee would heartily approve.) You might be wondering now with my slightly tongue-in-cheek introduction why I would take our worship time to focus on the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. Let me try to explain:

I myself have often pondered where Jesus might have been during those first 40 days after his resurrection. We owe the forty days of appearances to Luke alone who mentions it also in the first chapter of Acts. In Mark and Matthew Jesus seems to have gone up into heaven on Easter Day. John seems to have no opinion at all; he ends his Gospel with Jesus sitting there talking to Simon Peter on the shores of the Galilean Sea.

There are ten recorded appearances of the Risen Jesus in the Gospels. Paul adds more, especially in I Corinthians 15, where he includes the sudden appearance of Jesus to him on the Road to Damascus among the verifiable times when The Lord appeared. Most of the others took place on Easter Day, seven to be exact. One week later Jesus came back to give Doubting Thomas a second chance. At about the same time, if John 21 is to be taken as historical, he met seven of the apostles on the shore of Galilee for breakfast.

Paul testifies in I Corinthians 15 that Jesus appeared to Cephas (Peter) and to the Twelve, possibly the same as the visit as is recorded in the Gospels. Then Paul continues, "He appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters, most of whom are still alive (That spectacular visit by the way is otherwise un-reported in the Bible.) Then he appeared to James (his brother), and, last of all, he appeared to me," Paul that is, obviously referring to the blinding light episode in Acts 9, where he could hear but did not see the risen Christ. Previously, Luke had written in Acts 1 that "The Lord presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during 40 days." – but no specifics at all are included there. John seems convinced that Jesus was not continually present, but that he went and came at will. (John 21).

The question of where Jesus was when he was not with them is still a mystery. I cannot give you a definitive explanation, mainly because it is not clear in the Bible. We must sit humbly by the side of the road until the mysteries of God are unraveled for us. You cannot command the Lord God of earth and heaven to cough up an answer when you want it.

There are some possible guesses. One would be that he floated back and forth between heaven and earth as the Father requested or required, i.e., if he ascended first at dawn on Easter, he could have gone back and forth for forty days and then ascended for good. It could also be that he was off somewhere planting other seeds and changing other souls, even visiting other planets and stations and places. It does not seem likely that he would have remained on earth in hiding, only to jump out now and then to catch them off guard. If he descended into hell, as we say in the creed, that would have occurred prior to Resurrection morning.

The Ascension is a commanding story which every time I read it makes me sparkle with wonder. Luke says they came together on the 40th day after Easter and for starters they asked Jesus when he was going to restore the Kingdom of Israel. I mean, "Where is this all going Lord; what is going on?" Are we there, yet?" You see it was fine with them that he had conquered death, but if the Messiah's purpose (and their hope) was to restore God's people to power and drive out the occupying Romans, "When on earth is it going to happen? I mean if you can conquer death surely you can conquer Caesar! You are going on to heaven but we are still going to be here on earth; what gives?"

Luke does not say that Jesus scolded them or expressed or even hinted his disappointment with their question, unless you can read between the lines. They did not yet understand the purpose of his coming, and sometimes I fear that we really do not either. We are taught and trained by nature to look for and ask, "What's in it for me?" I think Jesus wanted to say to them, "Oh dear, I have been with you for three years and you still do not know why I came." But he was nice. All the Bible says he said was, "It is not for you to know the times and the seasons that the Father has set for us."

Be patient. No one knows the day or the hour. The Holy Spirit will give you the power to become my witnesses in all Judea – that's right around them, Judea is the Roman name for Judah, the Province they were in, like for us the local community of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County; then go out to Samaria, the strange country beyond their borders, and finally to the ends of all the earth, that's everybody, everywhere.

That's a good sermon: It is as if Jesus were saying, "Tend to your knitting here at Sharon Church, folks. If you are not a strong, willful and unified congregation, solidifying matters here first only then to head out to change the world – you will not be much help to anybody. If you do not get things in

order and have a common goal to strive for, you will never get there or if you do, you will not know where you are.

One of Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Successful People, you might recall, is "Begin with the end in view! Make sure you know where you are trying to go. If we do not immerse ourselves in the Word of God and consume it as if our very lives depended on it, we will not be much help in spreading The Power and the Peace of God's Word to others who need it.

In order to give a worthwhile gift, you have to have a worthwhile gift to give. Otherwise you will be sharing hints and guesses about who you think God in Christ might be and what He possibly might require. But, that will never do. I do not need to remind you that we have enough hints and guesses in the world already. If we do not own the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit as our very own, then the benediction and blessing we send out to the world will be shadow of what God needs and wants.

We have a lot of grand activities going on at Sharon Church, and a committed group of laypeople carrying the load. It is remarkable. But I think it could all be channeled into a single purpose and direction. What main goal are we trying to reach – not just to become a better church, but what kind of Church and how do we plan to get there? If I do this and you do that, and he, she and they do this and that, well, it will surely keep things moving. But it tires out those who are doing it, and we go in round and round in circles. In my visitor's opinion we have too few people trying to do too many things.

Anyway, as I said, Jesus was preaching a good sermon. But watch what happened: as he was speaking to them, telling them what they should do after he was gone, it says: "He was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight." (Now some of you might be wishing the same thing might happen here this very moment in this pulpit. It probably won't, so don't get your hopes up too high.) But, did you hear that, "He was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.

I know it speaks on an ancient cosmology where hell is down, heaven is up and the earth is in-between. It isn't that way, as you know. If you could go down through planet earth you would come out on the other side of this spinning globe in China. If you go up, you will run into the moon or Jupiter or Mars. We do know that earth is here, but where are heaven and hell?

It reminds me of the day, shortly after my father had died long ago when we persuaded my Mother to come down to Florida for a visit, hopefully to agree to stay with us in Ft. Lauderdale. My Mom was growing on in years but she was still a most intelligent woman. For a lot of reasons though, she had never been on an airplane. And she didn't trust them, not at all: how can they stay up there with just air between them and the earth? It is kind of phenomenal. But she agreed that if I flew up to Pittsburgh and came back down on the plane with her, she would try it.

She did. We booked two seats on US Airways, Mom by the window and me on the aisle. The whole time, she squeezed me with her one hand so hard it still hurts when I think of it; and in the other she squeezed her little bottle of nitro-glycerin tablets. Off we went. She managed pretty well, but then, when we leveled off at 35,000 feet, it all became a little choppy, for me, not the pilot.

My mother looked at me and said, looking out the window, "Where is it?" I said, "Where is what?" She replied, "Where is heaven?" I said, "I don't know, Mom". She said incredulous, "You don't know?" I said, "Well you see no one knows for sure where heaven is; it is not a spatial concept anymore, Mom," feeling dumber all the time. She said, "I thought you were a famous preacher (Moms say things like that.) and you don't know where heaven is, oh dear." I mumbled, "But the Bible was written in an age when a previous cosmology was in vogue. It was a pre-Copernican spatial idea that the earth is flat and you would fall off it if you went too far." "What's a cosmology?" she asked. "Well, it is the way to look at the universe", I whimpered back.

She paused a bit and then said, (my very own adorable and admiring Mother), "Just to think, your father and I helped you through high school and college and theological seminary and you still don't know where heaven is, oh dearie me." Then she turned her back away from me, and peered out her window. As we passed through a cloud, she said triumphantly, "It has to be out here somewhere!" And, she kept on looking.

That's what the disciples were doing, to return to Acts 1, as Jesus was taken up into heaven in a cloud. They were standing there gazing with wonder, looking up into the cloud which engulfed him. They were confused. No wonder: first they had him; then he was crucified, dead and buried; then he came back to life again; then they had him again, puzzled but certain. Now here he was going away again. If you have ever lost someone you loved too

much to lose, you will understand their bewilderment and their fear. While they were gazing... but God would not let them gape in wonder for too long. He sent two angels to get them moving on, who told them to be up and doing and quit looking up into the sky.

Well, we have been a little scattered hither and yon, so it is time to raise the mainsail and head for home with something concrete to hold on to. Three little points:

First, it is critical that the Ascension be included to complete the life story of Jesus on earth. If he had not been lifted up after he had faced death and came back to life, what would have happened next? Where would he have gone? Back to human life to live out a normal span and then die of old age? Not likely. (I often wonder the same thing about Lazarus by the way, where he went after Jesus gave him life again in Bethany.)

The New Testament throughout, from the Prologue of John until the end of Revelation, teaches that Jesus was there with God at the beginning of the creation and he will come back again from God at the closing of the age. It would not make sense then to have him co-habit the earth with ordinary mortals and expire and wait in the ground for his own return. It is Luke's way of completing the story. What happened to the Risen body of Jesus: "Well, it is simple; it was taken up to heaven, in a cloud, just as you and I in Christ will one day be."

Second, the Ascension points us in the right direction, upward - my mother notwithstanding. With the disciples, we also stand in awe and gaze at the magnificent and miraculous ways of God. We stare up into the heavens, and into the heart of the Universe, in our attempt to know and understand what on earth is going on, on earth. Nietzsche once warned that you should not stare too long into an abyss, or the abyss will begin to stare back. Well, true, but this is not an abyss. This is the Bible's way of saying that we do not need to worry about what comes next. That is in the hands of God anyway. What we need to do is get on with it here and now and do our best to do our part, depending on the Grace of God in Jesus Christ to see us through, and he will.

Sometimes you have to lose and surrender in order to gain and win. "Unless the seed falls into the ground and dies, it cannot sprout up into glorious fields of grain." In John, Jesus said his time had come: "A little

while, and you will see me no more, and again a little while and you will see me again.” (John 16:16) “You will have pain now” (at my parting) he said, but your pain will be turned into joy....I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” (John 16:22)
Sometimes you have to let go, to find what you need. We gain by losing.

Third and last, the gift of this story of the Ascension of Jesus is a glorious gift of God. As we contemplate the heart of the universe and the mysteries of God, trying and re-trying all we seek to know and do not know, it thrusts us into what my Professor of Philosophy friend used to preach: “Man’s chief glory is to think!” It is. Contemplating the heavens on a starry, starry night is unrivaled in the realm of contemplation. Staring into the heavens is worth the while; gazing up and wondering as the Psalmist did: “When I consider the heavens, the moon and stars which thou hast ordained, what is man that you art mindful of him, or the son of man that you would care to visit him? But you have made us a little lower than the angels and have crowned us with glory and honor.” Psalm 8 says you are worth it in the mind of God. You, and I, matter. You matter because you are you, and you belong to him. Your life has meaning, to find it Browning added, is your meat and drink. You can trust the One who gave you life, now in Christ to give you life forevermore.

But you cannot linger too long there on the hills outside Jerusalem, or in your own back yard or at the observatory checking out the formation of stars. We have to look up to see majesty of God. But, each and every time you gaze for too long, two men in white, messengers of God, angels, will come and tap you on the shoulder, and ask, “Why do you stand here staring up into the sky? Or, as the angel said on Easter Morning, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” There is work to be done all around you here on earth, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Get on with it, will you? Your life in Christ is secure. Your seat at the heavenly table is set and your meal will be prepared and delivered in God’s own time. You do not need to worry or wonder anymore. Christ will see you through. Meanwhile, be patient. God will never fail you nor forsake you. Christ said that he goes on to prepare a place for you, and when your place is ready, you will be called, not one moment before and not one second after the time is perfect. Christ will come again and punctually on time, he will receive you unto himself.

In Bible times the servant went ahead to look for lodging for the master, to make sure it was suitable for him. There were no Holiday Inns or reservation

systems on-line. The servant went ahead to find and prepare a place. And when it was ready, the servant came back and told his Master that it was time to go. In this case the Master has gone on to prepare place for us, his servants. And, he will come again, just as the angels said he would, in the same way he left, going up in a cloud. Glory be to God.

But meanwhile, the Holy Spirit is here to empower us to be all that we want to be, and do all that we want to do, and to serve the Risen Christ with gusto and with grace and find joy as we do, for now and forever more. Amen.