

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Luke 24:44-53

SERMON TITLE: Why Up?

What is it about up? We say, “Stand up for yourself. Things are looking up. Pull yourself up. I’m feeling up today. Look up and see the stars. The sun is up. ‘Up, up, and away in my beautiful balloon.’ ‘Up we go into the wild blue yonder.’”

What is that we see when we look up? In the daylight, it’s the massive sweep of the sky from horizon to horizon. At night, we peer into the darkness—a darkness pierced by countless lights—and we’re given a glimpse into the mysterious expansiveness of the universe that produces jaw-dropping awe. How do we feel when we’re up? We feel joy, energy, vitality, power, happiness. What’s the significance of standing up? Well, when we’re up we’re not sitting or reclining. We’re ready for action; we’re ready to be counted. In situations of risk, standing up can be an expression of boldness and courage.

Well, Thomas Troeger notes in all of this what he calls *the persistence of upness* in our human language and experience.¹ Up has powerful meaning for us, doesn’t it?

And up has powerful meaning in the scriptures. For example, at the end of Luke’s gospel, there’s a story of transition that moves us from the ministry of the flesh and blood Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit (which is the story told in Luke’s gospel), to the ministry of the church, empowered by the same Holy Spirit but now also associated with the presence of the living Christ (which is the story Luke tells in the book of Acts).

This transition story is found in Luke 24:44-53, and the story is set within the context of an encounter between the risen Christ and his disciples. Jesus has just appeared to his disciples and terrified them. They thought they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus invited them to look at his

¹ Thomas H. Troeger, “Luke 24:44-53 Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 2*, eds, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 523.

hands and feet and to touch him. He then ate a piece of broiled fish—all to make the point that he was still a body of flesh and blood—although a resurrected body. And now we come to the transition story. I invite you to listen for the word of God. **READ STORY.**

Well, did you catch the *upness* in the story? First of all, Jesus lifted up his hands and he blessed his disciples. And then: *While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.* In the tradition of the church, this is known as the Ascension of our Lord—and the story echoes an Old Testament occurrence in which the prophet Elijah ascended into heaven in a whirlwind attended by a flaming chariot and fiery horses.

So the question is: Why up? Well, for the Jews in Jesus' day, up was literally where God was. They believed in a three-storied universe. Heaven was up above the realm of the visible sky. Below was the nether world where the negative spiritual forces dwelled. In between was earth, the home for people and plants and animals.

Now for many of us today, this ancient world-view is no longer tenable. Even our kids pick-up on this. For example, Pastor Ignacio Castuera of Trinity UMC in Pomona, CA, tells the story of a Sunday School class he once taught in 1962 on this text from Luke's gospel. Well, one of the kids in his class was a very smart 13 year old named Eddie who knew a lot about astronomy. He also liked to shock his Sunday School class and shake up Pastor Eddie's teaching, so he posed a question: *I wonder how far Jesus has traveled since the Ascension. If we assume that he is traveling at the speed of light, he has only reached the far ends of our Galaxy, The Milky Way.* Pastor Ignacio didn't answer Eddie's question. Instead, he asked the class: *What do you think?* The majority of the class agreed with Eddie.²

² The Rev. Ignacio Castuera, "Sermon for the 7th Sunday of Easter," day1.org, http://day1.org/679-sermon_for_the_7th_sunday_of_easter.print (accessed May 23, 2009).

So why up? Well, to quote Thomas Troeger again, *the direction “up” may have left our cosmology, but it has never left our souls.*³ For many of us, the combination of words “up” and “heaven” do not acquire their meaning through scientific discovery, but through spiritual discernment. Our souls have come to understand that the *upness* in Luke’s story is not about an observable aspect of the physical universe like the planets and the stars, but a spiritual reality—a state of being that speaks to us of God and mystery and awe and spirit—a state of being in which God’s will is done completely. The *upness* of heaven speaks to us of God’s transcendence—of God’s otherness—and even in a sense, of God’s distance from created things.

So when the resurrected Jesus lifted up his hands to heaven and bestowed a blessing upon his disciples, he was evoking the divine—he was linking his blessing with God’s blessing. And when the story says that the resurrected Jesus was *carried up into heaven*, it’s a way of saying that Jesus was being united with God—no longer in the flesh and blood of his human body—or even in the resurrected body that his disciples could see and touch—but with God in mystery and awe and spirit.

But notice this, with the *going up* there’s also a promised *coming down*. Jesus said to his disciples: *I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*

In the scriptures, there is this an interplay between the divine and the created order that is spoken of in the spatial imagery of up and down. We see it in the Old Testament story of Jacob’s ladder. Jacob had a dream. He saw a ladder reaching between heaven and earth and he saw divine beings going back and forth on this ladder between heaven and earth—ascending and

³Thomas H. Troeger, “Luke 24:44-53 Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 2*, eds, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 523.

descending. He also heard God say to him: ***Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.*** After he awoke from his dream, Jacob said: ***Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.***

For Luke, when Jesus transitions from his flesh and blood presence with his disciples—he moves up into the realm of mystery that is the dwelling place of God, but the Holy Spirit moves down to bestow power upon the disciples.

Now paradoxically, even though Jesus has ascended, Luke wants us to know that there are still signs of Jesus presence left behind. His presence is revealed, for example, in the breaking of the bread around the table and wherever two or more are gathered in his name.

But apparently, these signs are not enough to empower the disciples' mission to the world. This power must come from on high—from up there to down here. This power must come from God.

And in this transition story, the risen Christ makes the mission clear. His disciples are to be witnesses to the Messiah who suffered and was raised from the dead, and to the scriptural hopes that he fulfilled. His disciples are to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations in his name. So what does this mean? The message is very simple: In and through Jesus Christ, our lives can be turned around—our thinking can be transformed—and our relationships with God and with other people can be restored.

Now I know, being witnesses like this can be intimidating—that's why we need to be ***clothed with power from on high.*** And that power does come. United Methodist Bishop Minerva Carcano tells the story of a 9-year old girl named Erica. Erica was so filled with joy when she came to know Jesus that she insisted that all her friends know him too. Bishop Carcano picks up the story in her own words: ***One day [Erica] took me to her neighborhood to***

invite the children to a Vacation Bible School our church was having. We went with colorful flyers in hand. I expected that we would tell the children and their parents about the dates and time and place of the Vacation Bible School, leave them a flyer as a reminder, and be on our way. Erica saw her job differently. When we got up to the first home and the door was opened she stepped right up and said, “We’ve got great news about Jesus and my pastor will tell you all about it.” I stood there flabbergasted, but she was right. Our job was first and foremost to spread the Word, proclaim the Good News, tell others about our Risen Lord. Erica and I worked hard that day because she did not want any child in her neighborhood to miss out in hearing about Jesus and the Vacation Bible School.⁴

Now if a 9-year old girl named Erica can be clothed with power like this to motivate her witness for Jesus Christ, then why can’t we? After all, Jesus is no longer around in the flesh to do it for us, you know. The responsibility is ours—and the power from on high is available to us—because when Jesus went up, the Holy Spirit came down—which is only to say that the power comes from God—the mysterious one—the transcendent one—the distant one—the one we think of as being *up there*—who has promised to be with us down here in power. Is it any wonder then that Luke’s gospel ends with the disciples worshipping Jesus Christ, their ascended Lord, in Bethany, and then returning to Jerusalem in great joy to continually bless God in the temple? Perhaps worship is an appropriate response for us—along with bearing witness to the good news of Jesus Christ to all the world--but that’s for us to decide.

So now I pose the question: *What difference does “up” make in your life?*

⁴ Bishop Minerva Carcano, “The Good News Is for Everyone,” day1.org. http://day1.org/852-the_good_news_is_for_everyone.print (accessed May 23, 2009).