

What Goes Up, Must Come Down

Ascension Sunday

May 17, 2015

Gordon Wiersma

Texts: Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

On this Sunday that we celebrate the youth of our congregation who have made their profession of faith, it would seem to be a good goal for the day that we not embarrass them. Now simply by mentioning them at all as I am doing right now, I have probably already embarrassed them already - embarrassing youth is something that adults seem to excel in – a gift that comes naturally, even when we're not trying. But I'm thinking of this goal of not embarrassing them on a bit deeper level – thinking of it when it comes to faith, to church, to a life of faith – and I'll try to show you what I mean.

For instance – what about the Ascension story? Celebrating the Ascension of Jesus is less well known as far as church year observances go, but I think the story of the Ascension is an interesting one to wonder about – what are we supposed to believe about this story? And what I mean is, that in our post-modern, technological, quantum world, a story of Jesus floating up into the clouds into the heavens is not something that fits our worldview very well – I mean, in the universe we live in, there is no up! - only space - and to say you believe in this story, or that you have to believe in it, could be, well, embarrassing. I don't mean to be flippant or offend anyone with that characterization, but it seems like sometimes we don't talk about such things so much – but I'd like to: what are we to make of such a story today? And my answer to that, not trying to sound too coy, is to say we should make of it just what those who first experienced it did – which is to say, I do not think the main point of the Ascension story is the how, but the what, and even more the why.

Look at Acts 1 & Luke 24 – they tell the same story, but notice that the 2 versions are different – Luke says 'while Jesus was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven' – Acts says 'Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight and 2 men appear: 'stop looking up...he will return'' – different versions...from the same writer! – if the

exact details were the main point, you'd think Luke would be precise about that. But what does stay the same as the story of Jesus' Ascension is told is this: a strong focus on the gift of the Holy Spirit; a sense that this Ascension event is a good and joyful thing; and an emphasis on the disciples being witnesses to Jesus – those are the things that seem to be most important as this story is told.

And what I think is important about that for us, is that when it comes to a story like the Ascension, you don't have to suspend your mind or ignore what you know about the world. It's OK to say that how this story is described doesn't sync completely with what we know – it's OK to say that the how isn't most important; and to say that not to avoid what is difficult, but in order to focus on what matters in the story and in our lives; to do so in order to affirm that faith is not a collection of snapshots or a catalogue of events but a living expression of who God is and what our lives are about. Which is, in the case of the Ascension, something like this: the story of Jesus Christ does not end with the resurrection, it begins; the resurrection of Jesus does not so much complete something as it opens up something – opens up a new reality in which Jesus' disciples can live; the Ascension says this story of the Risen Lord is continuing. And how it continues is through the presence of Jesus Christ changing from being present in a physical way to being present through the Spirit – that's what the emphasis on the Holy Spirit is about in this story; the gift of God's Spirit is the presence of the Risen Christ for Jesus' disciples and in this world in an ongoing way. That is the witness of which this Ascension story speaks – it is not just for those disciples who witness that event, it is that all who follow, people like us, are a witness to the presence of Christ among us – being a witness is not holding a snapshot of this event but rather it is to show the ongoing event of the resurrection, the God of life, at work in the world and in our lives. Which strikes me as a story not to be embarrassed about at all – but a story that speaks to our world today.

But let me test that out a little by taking a turn to something different. How many of you heard this week about the new Pew Research Center study with a poll on religious affiliation in the U.S.?...youth? – no?! (I thought that might be the case – I'm probably embarrassing them right

now). Well, let me summarize for the youths and for those who didn't hear about the study this week. The poll showed a continuing trend of the past several decades, that in the U.S., Christianity in general and mainline Protestant denominations in particular (such as the RCA) are declining in numbers. And of particular interest is that younger adults – the Millennials, late teens up into early 30s – increasingly having no official religious affiliation at all. They have come to be known as the NONEs – religious affiliation? none – over 1/3 of all millennials are now NONEs - that's more than double the percentage of previous generations. As a church/ congregation – as part of the CHURCH – this trend is something for us to pay attention to. We could pay attention with hand-wringing and anxiety – this is bad, very bad!; we could do so with fear and foreboding – we're going to fade away (die!) We could respond with frenetic activity – do something! - we have to survive! Or we could respond by listening. I wonder if some of these NONEs would feel embarrassed to say they are a Christian – that might be hard for us to hear, but many of those NONEs say their impression of faith is that it does not engage the world and their lives in meaningful ways – that Christianity is just against things, or just about details that have little to do with real life; perhaps some deep listening hears that for NONEs it is not as much a leaving of the church as a sense that the church has left a place of relevance to their lives. And like it or not, Christianity is painted with that broad brush.

So I was trying to listen to that study – to the voices and views that the numbers evoke; and as I listened, I also thought that perhaps what does bring some uneasiness or fear as Christians, is that it feels like a loss of power – of influence – of status. But what if we would look and realize that such a situation is actually not a new or unusual thing for our faith – in fact, all the biblical stories we hear of the church are in a world where Christianity is an extreme minority. So what if in our context, we are guided by that context? What if, for example, we listen to this Ascension story – this ancient story for a post-modern world? – here is a story that says we are part of the ongoing story of the resurrection; that says the Spirit is given, present, as God's gift of love and life; that says we are witnesses, our lives showing the call and purpose of life as children of God. In that time when to be a Christian is to be few in numbers and low in the ranks of power, we're

given a simple and powerful template for being the church, a faith that has substance and integrity — a faith that has something to say, and to listen to, in our post-modern world full of those NONEs.

OK - so let's do that kind of faith, and it will fix everything! No – we're not called to fix anything – we are called to be witnesses – and so we want to nurture and affirm the kind of faith that this Ascension story speaks of; which is, I think, the kind of faith these youth offer to us today. Because first of all we have to say about these young people, that they are counter-cultural! – they are not NONEs! – we need to appreciate that it is not always easy as a young person today to identify as a person of faith. But rather than their faith being something that stands against our world, I hear in the faith they express something that can speak to a NONEs culture. Denis says that faith is to be connected with God and to know that God is with me; Caroline speaks of the call to serve God and others, following God's path and plan; Ashley witnesses to the importance of the Holy Spirit with us in our lives and the confidence that gives: we are not alone; Madelyn expresses a faith through which God changes our lives to something beautiful and frees us to show God's love; a faith that delights in the good news of God's call to serve others.

This is faith that is not about fear but about hope – not about what we are against but what we are called for – faith that sees our lives as part of the ongoing story of the Risen Christ. The Ascension story gives a powerfully simple frame for the life of faith: Christ is not gone, he is with us by the Spirit, and our lives are a witness – and these young people today express such a faith. Rather than being embarrassed, they speak of being proud to be a Christian by being faithful to God, of depending on God in all circumstances, of inspiring people by love for God – those are the paths of what it means to be a witness to the Risen Christ among us. In a broken world, in an abundant world; in a world of NONES and in a world seeking meaning, such faith will speak good news in our lives and in our world.

As Denis concludes - *Bottom line: I will be a Christian and try to connect with God in any way.*

Thanks be to God. AMEN.