

“Making Sense of the Ascension.”

Acts 1:1-11

One of the little games that college students often like to play is, if the professor's late, how long do we have to wait? At one university custom dictated that if a professor was ten minutes late, class was canceled.

Well, a professor arrived early one morning for a 9:00 a.m. lecture. He placed his hat on his desk, and went to the faculty room. Before he knew it, it was 9:10. By the time he got back to his classroom, it was empty.

The next day, he let his students have it. "When my hat is here," he fumed, "I'm here!"

The following day, the professor arrived at 9:00 a.m. He was met by the sight of 28 hats on 28 desks--and no students.

This evening, the liturgical calendar calls us to recall the Ascension of Christ. After Jesus' death and resurrection, he appeared to his followers many times over a period of forty days. During this time he taught them and he reassured them. The apostles wanted to know if Jesus would now restore the kingdom to Israel, but he told them to leave that to God. He instructed them not to leave Jerusalem until they received a very special gift--the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Receiving the Holy Spirit meant receiving power. The apostles would now be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. In Christ's final appearance to them, they stood watching as Jesus was taken up into Heaven in a cloud. That is the event we look at today. The Ascension of Jesus.

In the past, I have often been able to get away with not preaching on the Ascension of Jesus back into heaven. It's just too heady a subject for me to tackle. Many Christians have difficulty with the cosmology of the ascension. But: we'll see where we can go with this!

I saw a cute story by a pastor who tells about a six-year-old boy in his parish named Blair. Blair, he says, looks like a typical child, but talks like an adult. After church one Sunday, Blair asked the pastor if he could have a conference with him.

"Of course, Blair," he replied, "I'd be happy to visit with you anytime."

Blair responded, "First let me talk to my parents and see when they can bring me to your office. I'll give you a call. Thanks."

The six-year-old then shook hands with the pastor and walked away with the demeanor of a bank president who had just closed the deal. The pastor smiled and wondered, What's on his mind?

Three days later Blair sat in the pastor's office. He came straight to the point.

"I have a question to ask you," he began.

"Fine, Blair, what's your question?" said the pastor.

"How did that hole get in the sky?" asked Blair.

"I beg your pardon," the pastor stammered in uncertainty.

"Well, Pastor, you remember it says in the Bible when Jesus was baptized 'the heavens opened.'

The pastor gulped.

Blair continued, "What I want to know is how did that hole get there?"

There are some things you can't explain to a six-year-old--or a sixty-year-old. Scripture teaches us that Jesus ascended into the heavens. Well, where did he go? Does this mean that Heaven is a physical place, like earth, and so he flew like a rocket directly into the Pearly Gates?

When humans first began to launch space satellites, one well-meaning lady felt this would be the perfect way for us to discover heaven. She proposed that we figure out the exact day of the first Easter, add forty days to it to get to Ascension Day, then calculate the position of the earth on that day, then draw an imaginary line out from Jerusalem, with the confidence that this line would lead us to heaven. After all, that was evidently how Jesus did it.

Please do not take this passage too literally. Luke tells us in Acts that Jesus was "taken up into a cloud." As one writer notes, "this is the same cloud which led the Israelites in the wilderness. It is the same cloud

which covered Mt. Sinai, and the Mount of the Transfiguration. Being taken up in the cloud means that Jesus was taken up into the presence and person of God." He took his place at the right hand of God. He became one with the Trinity.

The people who are often the most frustrated with Christianity and with Theistic religious faith in general, are the people who feel that they have to have all of the answers. Everything has to make sense to them. Everything has to be empirically verifiable to them.

But in Christianity we don't have all of the answers. We simply cannot. Practicing Christians have learned how to accept mystery and to peacefully coexist with an incomplete picture of the eternal. We are told by the apostles to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," and then beyond that, we are to live with whatever we do not fully understand.

St. Paul, in I Corinthians 15, teaches us that when we die we are clothed with a new spiritual body, a body that is distinct from our physical body. Paul was obviously taking his cue from Christ's resurrection. The disciples at Christ's ascension saw Christ's glorified body taken up in a cloud and then they saw him no more. This is all cloaked in mystery. But it affirms what we know about Christ. He is risen and now he sits at the right hand of the Father.

Before Christ ascends, however, he does two things. **FIRST OF ALL, HE GIVES THE DISCIPLES THEIR ASSIGNMENT.** They are to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

You know the function of a witness. Something extraordinary happens. How do you know it happened? Well, there were witnesses. How is the world to know that God so loved the world that He gave His Son? There are witnesses. There were several hundred of them two thousand years ago when it happened; there are millions more who have experienced the risen Christ in their lives here-and-now. That is who we are. That is our task. To be witnesses.

On January 2, 2006, in Sago, West Virginia, there was a coal mine explosion that trapped thirteen miners for nearly two days. Only one miner survived. His name was John Casto. He was interviewed a few days later on CNN.

"I know the Lord was with us through it all," said John Casto, his voice breaking with sorrow and exhaustion. Then he talked about the hundreds of people who had been offering up prayers for the trapped miners in that little town.

"You know," he said at the end of the interview, "I'm not kin to none of those people under that hill over there, but each and every one of them is a brother to me, each and every one of them. Because you're my brother," he said, turning to the startled CNN reporter, "and you're my brother," he said, turning to the cameraman, "because I love Christ."

Now, that's a witness. Nothing pretentious. Nothing phony. Just a statement of fact about what John Casto has experienced in his life.

I sometimes wish that we in the UCC could be as comfortable and as natural about witnessing to our faith as some of our more evangelical brethren are. Far too often, someone has planted in our head that faith is a "private matter." After all, we don't "wear" our faith "on our sleeve."

I'm guilty of leaning that way myself, but what do we do with Christ's final instruction to his disciples? Would the faith still be alive today if everyone felt that it was a private matter that one should not discuss? Would all of these churches and great cathedrals have been built if everyone had considered faith a "private matter" to "keep to yourself?"

My Dad and I used to get into heated arguments about this all the time. He was fond of saying: "I would rather see a sermon than hear a sermon." Dad used to call church people "hypocrites." He didn't have much use for clergy, either. Well, God must have a sense of humor because one day I sensed God tap me on the shoulder to go into ordained ministry. When I went and told my Dad about it, he was surprisingly subdued -- I think that is because the poor man was in so much shock!

So, how do you and I -- remember, we are God's people together -- how do we share our faith with people like my Dad? We need some special help, don't we?!? Where do we get it? From Christ. CHRIST PROMISED TO SEND HIS HOLY SPIRIT.

"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about." Then a few verses later he adds, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you . . ."

Jesus knew that it would be difficult for his disciples to provide a living witness to their Master's death and resurrection. After all, they were to take their testimony to the ends of the earth. To everybody? Arabs? Jews? Africans? Asians? The barbarians living in the Bronx? Everybody? Yes, everybody. It was a tall order. It seemed like an impossible assignment. That is why he promised them that they would not go about the task alone. His Holy Spirit would be with them.

"We think of the Holy Spirit as Comforter," says biblical scholar William Barclay, "but the original meaning of the word 'comfort' was 'with strength.' The original meaning of comfort was to give courage to, to imbue with strength." The Holy Spirit was coming to empower them to continue the work Christ had begun, the work Christ calls us to today. Christ would not simply be leaving his hat on the desk as a symbol of his presence. He would be with them, closer than the very air they breathed.

In his best-selling book *Tuesdays With Morrie*, journalist Mitch Albom shares a particular conversation he had with his old mentor, professor Morrie Schwarz, before Morrie died of ALS. Mitch asked Morrie if he were afraid of being forgotten after his death. Morrie replied that he wasn't worried about it. Recalling all the lives he had influenced, Morrie remarked, ". . . love is how you stay alive, even after you are gone."

And then professor Schwarz asked Mitch a question: "Do you ever hear my voice sometimes when you're back home? When you're all alone?"

And Mitch answered yes, of course he heard his old teacher's voice. He had internalized Morrie's voice, his values, his presence. Even after Morrie was gone, Mitch would still be guided by his presence.

So would it be with the disciples, but in a more personal and intense way. The Holy Spirit would be with them. Just as the Holy Spirit is with us today. I don't know what your life situation is. I don't know what giant you are facing today. But I do know this. You are not alone. Christ has ascended to the Father. And he has sent us his Holy Spirit to comfort us and to empower us. No assignment is impossible if God is with us.