

**Sermon: Love Literally Ascending****Scripture: Acts 1: 6-11****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: May 24, 2009**

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The ascension is that in between moment in the gospel story. We have been in the season of Easter for the last 6 weeks or so and in the gospel this is the time when Jesus is appearing to the disciples in bodily form. But then Jesus stops appearing bodily which leads us into the next chapter of this great story which is Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends and inspires the disciples to go forth to teach and heal and bring people together to walk the Way of Jesus. The ascension, though, that we celebrate today, is how the gospel writer, Luke, explains' Jesus' physical departure.

He says that as the disciples were standing there listening to Jesus and as Jesus says to them "you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit", Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. Now I tend not to take this literally, that a cloud came and actually bore Jesus away into the sky, but rather I understand it as the disciples' way of trying to express a spiritual reality that ultimately cannot be put into words. Behind the literal image of Jesus ascending into the heavens is an experience that the disciples had.

For almost 40 days after Jesus' death, the disciples were experiencing the presence of Jesus not as a ghost nor as a sense within themselves but in some glorified physical state. Now his appearances I do take literally. There are those scholars and progressive Christians who would disagree and say its all metaphorical and not historic fact. But I'm prone to split hairs. I would say that while Jesus lifted up on a cloud and whisked away to heaven is probably metaphorical, I'm holding out for the resurrection appearances literally happening. In fact I'd even go so far as to say its not just a belief of faith but even can begin to make sense on a more deductive level.

I mean, think about it. We really don't know all there is to know about the physical world and how it operates, do we? In fact we know very little about the physical world when you consider all there is to know. But what we are realizing and acknowledging these days is how spiritual or emotional or psychological realities can manifest themselves in the material world. To give a very simple example - how

emotional trauma can manifest itself in physical illness. Or how critical loving touch is not only to the emotional well-being of an infant but also to his/her physical well-being as well. So it does not seem impossible to me that there could be a human person over the course of the millions of years of human existence that would be such an embodiment of Love, in all its great power, that his or her actual physical body could be transformed so that it would no longer waste away through the natural processes of the earth but instead transcend those processes and become a new or renewed physical reality unlike anything else we have ever known. I'm no scientist but that strikes me as being within the realm of the possible.

Haven't we even just over the last 100 years come to experience things that at some point in the past we would have said were impossible? The human being flying through air, split second communication with someone on the other side of the globe, the splitting of the atom, curing of certain diseases, and on and on. Well, why couldn't it be that our knowledge one of these days will develop to the point where we could actually understand how it is possible for the human physical form to transcend decay and death? Or maybe someone will have the experience again and science will be able to study them and have to revamp so much of what we know about natural processes and the physics of the world. I know, I know, I'm not a scientist, and probably have no idea what I am saying but I want to throw my weight in with the mystery of it all, that we don't know nearly as much as we claim to know. And might it be possible that they knew and experienced something back then, 2000 years ago, that we don't know and experience now but that we might come to know and experience some day?

I'm afraid I've gotten off track. I was talking about the ascension and how the Jesus-on-a-cloud-flying-to-heaven was probably a metaphor but that Jesus resurrected, in my book, I believe was probably literally the case. And I was trying to explain how I could make that distinction. And I have to say, I do think there is something at stake in this distinction and what at stake is this: how much credence and stock we give to the power of Love in this world, a power that is not only the very center piece of our faith and our world view but also a power that is usually underestimated and underappreciated. So in my mind, holding out for the literal truth of the resurrection - rather than joining Borg, Crossan, Spong and all those wonderful theologians and biblical scholars who say that the whole story is metaphorical - is about holding out for the reality of love being so

immense and so powerful that we really have no idea how profoundly it can impact and change the world, even the physicality, that material make-up of the world. To say Jesus loved so deeply embodied love so fully in his life that death could not contain him, is to speak literally of the power and reality of love. And to say that Jesus' transcendence of death is a metaphor for love makes it all more abstract. And I want to say "no, Jesus was human and real and his resurrection from death was real and through that he pulled back the curtain on what true reality looks like, reality infused with LOVE. It can transform the very material realm as we know it. Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela led movement based upon the principals and reality of love and it did literally transform the structures within which millions of people in the country lived. And there were probably many political scientists who said it wouldn't be possible even as people are saying that about the Israeli-Palestinian situation today.

The story of Jesus, his life, death, resurrection, ascension and then the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is about the power Love has to transform what we call and know of reality itself! On this Memorial Day weekend as we remember the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who have given their lives for the tragedy that is human warfare, I want to remember and want our church to be a place that remembers and proclaims the reality transforming power of love. Our faith places the power of love front and center and says that nothing will transform us and the world as love will, no power of military might however great the intentions will transform reality as love. It's there front and center. I'm not saying our religion has not done a very good job at believing and promoting this even though it's what our founder clearly taught and exemplified in his own life and death.

But there is also more than just teaching and exemplifying that our founder gave to us and this – believe it or not – brings us back to the ascension and what follows. So what the disciples experienced and tried to put into words through their gospels was this: for about 40 days after his death, they were catching glimpses, having conversations and even meals with and walking down the road with the resurrected Christ – which as I proved to you was literally and actually what happened J ! – But then the resurrection appearances stopped all the sudden. Jesus was no longer there. The way the disciples told the story was that Jesus ascended on a cloud into heaven not to be literally seen any more.

But that was not the end of the story. The ascension was really the in-between moment between the end of part 1- Jesus' life, death and resurrection and part 2 – Pentecost and the story of the church. Because you see what happens once Jesus ascends into heaven and stops appearing outside of the disciples and the community is that the Holy Spirit is sent from heaven – like tongues of flame, they say – and it's this profound moment of inspiration when the disciples no longer look outside of themselves for inspiration and guidance but they realize that it is all found there within. They can no longer see Jesus outside of themselves but this then sets the incredible stage for them to live Jesus out through their lives, which looks like what? It looked like a community that was filled with love, worshipping a God of love, and all about healing and care-taking of one another and hospitality to the outsider and refusing to respond to hatred and violence with anything but nonviolence and love. It wasn't about personal gain and self-promotion or accumulation of goods or gaining of power or control. It was about living lives of Love for God and for one another. What a strange concept.

But that gets us into Pentecost and today we are at the point of Ascension where we are looking up to the heavens, watching with the disciples and waiting for what we do next. And I end this by bringing us back around to – believe it or not - the capital campaign. Cause we really do need to stay on task here for another couple of weeks and I need to encourage you to continue to consider deeply your contribution to the effort to replace the roof and restore the steeple and columns of this building. It is no small thing that this place stands here pointing the giant finger of the steeple up to heaven... no, not literally heaven up there but figuratively that is the effect. The reason this building is here at all is to point us in that direction, the direction of heaven, the kingdom of God, the realm of Love. And yes we've got to do the rather mundane work on the bricks and mortar, but then we trust that by not neglecting the physical reality of this church that the Spirit will do Her work and inspire us and many generations after us to go out to live the way of Jesus' love in this world around us, for that is the reason why we exist as are church: to reveal the reality transforming power of love in this world. Amen.