

Sermon: Lark Ascending
Scripture: Acts 1:6-14
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: June 5, 2011

So the story continues. If you thought it strange that we speak of the Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth incarnating as a single human being at Christmas and if you thought some of his teachings and the accounts of the miracles he performed during his life were strange and if you found it odd that during Holy Week we meditated upon this God-Man's walk through his suffering and gruesome execution and if you thought it strange that at Easter we celebrated his bodily resurrection and subsequent appearances, then I really don't blame you. It is strange, extremely strange, and the only thing that makes it less strange is the fact that we've heard of it so often that we don't really think too carefully about it anymore.

But this strange story doesn't end after the resurrection appearances either. It gets even stranger. If it had ended there, if Jesus had transcended death and appeared in physical form then he would still be around and available in physical form for us to go and visit in Nazareth or Israel or maybe on Mt Philo Rd in Charlotte for all we know. But he is not here, exactly. So of course there had to have been some moment in time that would warrant and make sense of the claim that Jesus conquered death, Jesus lives, literally, and yet we don't see him around anymore. Well, that explanation how is known as the Ascension.

The Ascension is basically that moment when Jesus' resurrected physicality, that put him in one place at one time when he could be seen and touched and communicated with, *dissolved*, is one way you might describe it, or transcended or eclipsed this current natural world and moved into another dimension of time and space, that other dimension of which the human being has always had hints of but little direct experience with. But as Jesus did this he wasn't like "see you later and good luck!" Instead he promised the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, a different manifestation of Godself, would come. He promised that it wouldn't be the end of the story but rather a whole new chapter!

And it is actually this chapter, in between the chapter about the direct and immediate revelation of God to humanity through Israel and Jesus and the final

fulfillment and culmination of all things, which happens on October 21st of this year (no, I'm just kidding), which happens whenever it happens... it's the in-between chapter that is the one we are currently living in. On one level it seems like a long chapter, over 2000 years it's been going on, but really in the scope of creation and even the smaller scope of the evolution of the human being, it's not even yet of an unreasonable duration. Give God a little time, will ya?! We might have a lot more of this chapter to go... or we might have 4 months and 16 days, who knows???

And so then the reasonable question is what is the in-between time for? What do we do with it. Well, you might say, it's time for us to "start cleaning up the place..." at least that's how the singer songwriter Patty Griffin names it. She's a contemporary folk/blues singer who has in the chorus of one of her most well-loved songs called "Mary" this description: "Jesus said 'mother I couldn't stay another day longer.' He flies right by and leaves a kiss upon her face. While the angels are singing his praises in a blaze of glory, Mary stays behind and starts cleaning up the place." Ahhh, mothers! They get little credit and little glory but make it all possible for the rest of us, even for God, Godself, the Christian faith proclaims in a very strange way!

So we are in the in-between stage, you and I and everyone else, and we are suppose to be cleaning up the place. I'm not so sure we are doing a very good job of it, though. Especially over the last 100 years it seems as though we have been making a mess of the place, actually, at an exponential rate. It's maybe the shadow-side of our lop-sided evolution. We have been evolving in what we know and what we can physically, materially, scientifically accomplish as a species; the diseases we can cure, the natural laws we can bend and transcend for our benefit, the knowledge that we are gaining of the natural world and yet less evolved, it could be suggested, is our moral and spiritual sense of what is good and right and beautiful and what is not. It's like as a species, we've been given the responsibility of receiving our driver's license at the inexperienced age of 11. We can hardly see over the steering wheel or remember which is the gas and which is the break, much less find the turning signal or the windshield wipers and we're on the phone as we go hurdling down the road at 60 miles per hour – weeeeeeee!! –

And so we are like, "look mom, I can split an atom" and you can just imagine Jesus, Mary and Joseph in unison saying "oh my Gosh!" Or "Look dad! Look at this

black stuff that comes out when I dig a great big deep hole in the ground, it's icky! But oooooohhhh, look what happens when I put this stuff and that stuff together and then pour some of this icky stuff into it!! Wow!! We can actually drive 100 miles per hour across the ground fly through the air at 30,000 feet over the earth's surface! This is great, this is fun!" And then to make matters worse, the same 11 year old is hearing the age old voice of religion holding out for the need for moral, ethical, spiritual development and discipline to accompany our technological gains and we're like, "eh, we don't need a big daddy God, we've got a god right here in us, in fact I'm a god and you're god and we're gonna do just fine....Wahooo.... as we careen around the corner and reach for our cell phone to text our friend! That's maybe what it's like. And, all the while, instead of cleaning up the place, as we are supposed to be doing, we are kind of making a huge mess of it all!

But the story is still not over. And it's also true that over the last centuries we really have been using our transcendence over the natural world to do some pretty incredible things as well; to save lives and overthrow tyrants, to seek justice and show mercy, to correct some of our wrongs and heal the earth even. God has not abandoned us. God still believes in us even if some of us no longer believe in Him.

And the Ascension is the prequel, the harbinger of what will come, the vision of the human being fully transcendent over the natural laws, so much so that this dimension of time and space and even death itself no longer holds him or her in place. But yes, there is a lot of struggle, a lot of suffering, a lot of mistakes and learnings still to come before we reach the final chapter, which is the evolved state of creation as fulfilled and glorified. The question for us is: do we want to be a part of the movement towards healing and not wounding, glorifying instead of defiling, peacemaking instead of warring, unification instead of division, ascension instead of declension because the movement is happening in both directions, in case you didn't notice. But our faith proclaims that while the story has many ascensions and declensions, and that in fact the declensions are quite necessary, over all the arc of the story is finally towards ascension. Praise God for God's abundant mercies that are renewed everyday. Amen.