

Up, Up, and Away? - Sermon Based on Acts 1:1-11
by David Hindman on Sunday, June 5, 2011

If you go to Jerusalem's Mt of Olives, you can visit the Chapel of the Ascension. Pilgrims have visited this memorial site since at least the 4th century. Inside the chapel tourists are shown the very spot where Jesus blasted off toward the heavenly realms. They're shown a rock formation remarkably in the shape of a foot, probably about a size 7. Not to be outdone our Muslim sisters and brothers also have a footprint of the prophet Mohammed in Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque. It's also in rock and about a size seven. But we're still one up on them because Mohammed's footprint is only from landing after his night ride from Medina to Jerusalem and Jesus' is the launch pad for a more celestial and eternal destination.

When I was in seminary I did an internship at a Richmond church. One Sunday a mom told me with a bit of a giggle something her seven year old had said the previous week. He'd wondered out loud about Jesus' return and thought he'd probably land first in Mechanicsville. For that seven year old Mechanicsville was the center of his universe. So why not there? Today if you go to Palestine you'll still meet Christians convinced that Jesus won't return first to Mechanicsville but to Jerusalem. After all, in Acts the two angelic messengers tell the upward looking disciples that they'll see Jesus return just as they saw him leave. To that young

boy's distress that departure and return location is the Middle East and not Hanover. Sad.

As is often the case the story of Jesus' ascension is to be taken seriously but not literally. As told in Acts, the story makes sense if you live in a flat three story universe. God dwells in the heavens, the dead and the demonic live as far as possible from God in the netherworld beneath the earth. And we humans live in the world between. In that universe of course the writer of Luke and Acts has Jesus return into the eternal presence of God by going up.

But that literally won't work in the world we inhabit. On a round planet, where's up? Up from one part of the earth is down on the other side. The earth rotates at 1000 miles an hour. So if we take the story literally Jesus is 50 miles west of Jerusalem just one minute later if he ascends straight up. So even the story is hard to swallow literally, but as Christ followers we can take it seriously. It may not be factual but it's certainly true.

We know this is true – we have better things to do than worry about when Jesus is returning. When the disciples ask Jesus when God is going to restore Israel, he says that's none of our business. Our job is to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth. By the way there's flat earth three story universe language again. Instead of de-coding God's timeline we're to tell others this incredible good news that the God of the universe has come to live among us. In a Jewish

carpenter from Galilee everything's changed for the whole creation. Instead of sending us a text message, God has made direct face to face contact. God doesn't just tell us life can be different from what we've know so far; in Christ God shows us that new life. The very life of God flows through Christ and now we know this truth – it can flow through ours, too. God's turned the world upside down and right-side up! In Christ we see the extravagant love that's the energizing source driving the whole creation, God's restless heart seeking us all and longing for us to come home, a radical Holy Spirit of grace so outrageous it dares forgive those who'd snuff out the life of God, the reckless joy and promiscuous hospitality of a God who always has room for one more at the table. We're to tell the tale of that God invading our world. Our very lives are to bear witness to what happens when God owns us body and soul. That's our job!

And this is true. It would be awesome to have direct encounters with the living resurrected Jesus like the disciples had for 40 days. But what we have is even better. In those 40 days Jesus' appearances weren't 24/7 company keeping with the 12. Acts says Jesus appeared to them many times, not all the time. And apparently only in Jerusalem, as Acts tells the tale. But now, thanks to the Ascension, Jesus isn't bound by time or space. Whether we're in Mechanicsville or Jerusalem, L'viv, Ukraine or an island in India or Tampa, Florida, or at the Lord's Table here, the risen Christ is with us. Any place we go - in life or in death

- Christ is there. In his ascension, Jesus goes into the heavenly realm but he doesn't go away. We simply experience his presence in new ways – in each other, in the poor, in the Word and at the table. He's nearer than ever. Nearer than breath itself. He's no longer to be seen in his earthly form but Jesus is within and among us. Like those disciples in Acts gazing up into the sky, we may no longer see Jesus. But in the words of Ephesians we pray that the eyes of our hearts will be opened to see awesome spiritual realities: see that the life of Christ gives us hope beyond words; see that we are incredible treasures in God's eyes; see that whatever rich life is Christ's is now also bequeathed to us by a generous Father; see that the power we've seen in Christ is available to us, too. With Christ we have received power to forgive and heal and love, to bring life to the dead or lost, to let God's powerful energy flow through us in new ways so God's dreams can come true. These are Christ's gifts to us. But none could happen lest he leave.

This is true. Sometimes we have to wait for God. On our own we go off in all directions with our own ideas about God's will and plan. Sometimes we have to wait to see better or hear more clearly or receive guidance needed so we don't get lost so easily. Now Jesus says Wait. Wait for the Spirit. Wait to receive power needed and strength required to persevere. On our own we'll go on our own path under our own speed and crash and burn so fast. Even after all their time with Jesus the disciples still don't get it – is Israel's time now? Wait. Wait for the

Spirit to point you in better directions and guide you on paths following God's ways. Listen. Pray. Discern. Be quiet in God's presence with one another. Wait. Power and wisdom will come. But wait until God acts and then follow God's lead.

It's true that Mohammed's footprint is on a rock in Jerusalem. Just like Jesus'. But the writers of Acts and much of the New Testament make a bolder claim. Mohammed flew to Jerusalem. Jesus has flown into the very heart and eternal life of God. Jesus is not just a good man or prophet. He is Lord of every principality and power, greater than our imagination and understanding, beyond our control but still within reach. He is the Beyond beyond our knowing. After 20 centuries we're still figuring out what it means to love and serve him. More and more we get it, but there's still so much to learn and obey. He's full to overflowing with God's light and life and he shares them with the truly hungry and thirsty. He fills the whole creation with his loving presence and power, but first and foremost as his disciples we're his to own and rule. He's the final authority guiding and giving life to all who call him Lord. He came from God and returned to God. That's our road, too. Our life's a gift from God. One day we'll be returned to our rightful owner. If we want to be at home with God, it makes sense to become friends now and learn God's ways and not be strangers. That's the truth, too. What we see in Jesus is what those who love and obey him become – alive, set free from time and space, forever with the Lord, the giver of Life. The

life we see in Christ is ours now for the receiving, He gives us this life like a new set of clothes into which we fit more and more, all to the glory of God. In the words of Charles Wesley, “Soar we now where Christ has led, following our exalted head; made like him, like him we rise, ours the cross, the grave, the skies – Alleluia!