

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on May 16, 2010 (Sunday after the Ascension)

Of all the miracles in Scripture – and there are a lot of them -- the Ascension of Jesus might just be the toughest one to reconcile. Water into wine; walking on water; even the resurrection itself may be easier for modern, rational Christians to accept. But the Ascension is tough. A person just doesn't float up into the sky like a runaway balloon or Mary Poppins. Beaming someone up only happens in Star Trek. The Ascension of Jesus is illogical, irrational, and impossible. Isn't it?

It certainly is when we find ourselves wrapped up in the mechanics of how it could have happened. Physics isn't much help here; nor is astronomy. And don't even think about bringing in Isaac Newton's apple and his laws of gravity. Science will not and cannot solve the mystery of the Ascension. I wouldn't go so far as to proclaim that the "*devil's* in the details" but when we get caught up with them we often miss the larger picture of why it matters. The temptation is to dwell on the impossibility at the expense of the extraordinary possibility. And when we start in a place of doubt it keeps our minds closed to the wondrous mystery of the divine.

When I was a kid there was a cartoon called "Underdog" – some of you may remember it. It ran from 1964 to 1973 (thank you Google) and featured an ordinary dog who, when called upon, would become Underdog and pronounce, "There's no need to fear, Underdog is here." I seem to remember that he always spoke in rhyme. His other catch phrase, and the reason I bring it up this morning, was "Up, up, and away!" Like a canine Superman, he could fly – I may have failed to mention that.

It's hard for me to hear the story of Jesus' Ascension into heaven without hearing Underdog proclaim, "Up, up, and away!" In the Acts of the Apostles we hear that Jesus was standing in the midst of his disciples when he was suddenly lifted up in a cloud and removed from their sight. In the account from Luke, who also wrote the Book of Acts, we further hear that he was in the process of blessing them even as he was lifted up. "Up, up and away!"

The problem with my profound theological comparison between Jesus and Underdog – besides the potential heresy – is that Underdog's statement doesn't hold true. The Ascension doesn't lead Jesus up and away but rather it leads him into a new relationship with the disciples. He is not up and away; he is present with them in a new way, one that transcends physical presence. One that is based exclusively on the experience of faith. In other words the same way that *we* relate to the risen Christ: through our own faith, through the Christ-like acts of one another; and through the sacramental mystery that is Holy Communion.

But of course the disciples don't immediately get this. You can picture them staring up at the sky in utter silence with bewildered looks on their faces wondering what in the world had just happened. Which leads to the question posed by the two angels who suddenly appear: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven?"

How often do *we* get caught looking for faith in all the wrong places? We look up hoping to see God when perhaps God is right in our midst. Or we look down, failing to see the wonders of creation. That doesn't make the life of faith some sort of cruel divine shell game: "Nope Jesus

isn't under this one; let's try that one." It just means that in order to fully know the presence of God we must look in unexpected places. Like our own homes or our workplaces or the new Panera at the Shipyard, or our own souls, or, and I know this is radical, this church.

Immediately before he takes his leave of the disciples, Jesus gives them a promise: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." That's what we celebrate next Sunday on Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit in power and great glory. But for now, it's a promise. A promise without which, the disciples will certainly not be able to act as true disciples of our Lord. If disciples are to follow Christ and share the good news through their words and actions, they need the Holy Spirit to empower them. More about that next week.

I do love that line spoken by the two angels after Jesus ascends: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven?" And I love it because it helps us get away from the dualistic dichotomy where up is good and down is bad. Heaven is up; hell is down – everybody knows that. That's the way preachers and artists have depicted things for generations. This is in part because up is pure mystery while down is well-known. When we gaze upward we see sky and stars and celestial bodies; when we look down we see our feet.

I talked about the Ascension with the kids at yesterday's Family Service – we had "Mass on the Grass" in the Memorial Garden – and it was wonderful to do so while literally looking up at the sky. And yet these angels remind us that God isn't just up, but everywhere. Stop looking up, they suggest, and see the love of God right here. Their time in heaven will come – wherever it might be located – but right now Jesus is in their midst in a new way. And that's the power and the promise of Jesus' ascension into heaven.

At first glance, the Ascension does reinforce our notion that heaven is up, up and away. But we can't forget that Christ's presence is not distant or remote or away; but right here. The point of the Ascension isn't that God is "Up, up and away" but rather in this place, in the here and now, present among us, abiding in you and me. And so while the mechanics of the Ascension may be hard to grasp – they're not really the point. The point is that Jesus is not taken away from us but that our relationship with him is simply transformed. That is the true miracle of the Ascension of our Lord.