

***“Whatever Comes Down Must Go Up”***

***Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53***

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***Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut***

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We’ve been obsessed with the stars lately, haven’t we? Not the ones on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, but the ones in the sky. The solar eclipse mesmerized us with a once-in-a-lifetime celestial show.

Periodically some asteroid comes along, worrying us with dire predictions of a collision with earth. Why? Because physics tells us *“whatever goes up must come down.”* A few years ago, the near-disaster of a Chinese rocket returning uncontrolled to crash on the earth reminds us however far “up” we go, gravity pulls us back.

We are heirs of over 500 years of modern science. We no longer believe in a three-tiered universe: heaven above, earth in the middle and hell below. The discoveries of Galileo and Newton, and space exploration in our time, turned our beliefs inside out. Galileo determined that the sun, not the earth, is the center of our solar system. Newton’s work on gravity was based on this discovery. Soviet cosmonauts, parroting the rhetoric of their atheist leaders, famously opined that there could not be heaven because they had made it into space and could not find it.

Then what are we to make of this story of the Ascension? It is that we declare by faith that Heaven is the center of our being and we are pulled back to God. *“Whatever comes down must go up.”* Our home is with God. Our heart’s deep longing is home, companionship with God. And for those for whom Earth is anything but Heaven, but more like hell, this offers a special word of hope

So what do we mean by “up?” And did Jesus ascend?

Let’s start with the second question first, because in some ways it is easier: did Jesus ascend? Yes. And no, I can’t prove it. But consider this: if you believe the Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the World; that he cured the sick, gave sight to the blind and movement to the lame; that he fed the hungry and ate with sinners; and that he rose from the dead: then believing in the Ascension is

not such a big leap. If you don't believe these things, then there is much more besides the Ascension that we must wrestle with.

The more challenging question is *"What do we mean by 'up?'"* Here are some ideas. Each Communion Sunday the celebrant invites us to "Lift up your hearts" and you respond "We lift them up to the Lord." We speak of "looking up" to people who serve as role models. Sigmund Freud once said that all people had a "basement of ghosts:" that those gone before us haunt us. Carlyle Marney, a widely recognized preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, countered that we have a "balcony of saints:" those who have gone before who are cheering us from above. It's worth remembering Hebrews 12:1-2: *"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."*

While we may not know exactly where "up" is cosmologically, we do know experientially. Something in our soul—or psyche, if you prefer (both come from the same Greek word)—something is elevated when we see an eagle soar, when we lift up our eyes to the hills, when we perk up our ears to the lark's song. Things start to "look up" when we do.

Nature plays this out every year about this time when the herring run on Cape Cod. I first watched this cycle of nature over four decades ago. It may sound boring in this digital, wired age, but it was and remains fascinating. The herring swim upstream, literally jumping up rocks or, in some places, human-made herring ladders, against incredible water pressure to spawn a new generation of their kind. It is hard-wired into their system. There is something in us, too, that is hard-wired to keep going against adversity, to not only survive but thrive. Does any of this sound familiar, church? Can I get an "Amen?" We need to look up to succeed.

We know we are lifted up by looking up. It is not by accident that I quoted Hebrews a few moments ago and its reference to racing. Runners know that running form deteriorates when we stop looking up ahead and start looking at our feet! Energy and speed suffer when we look down. When your mother or father told you to “stand up straight,” they knew exactly what they were talking about.

Ben Zander, a leadership coach, describes our inability to look up as the “downward spiral” which leads to death for organizations as well as individuals. Our founder, the Rev. John Wesley, knew this 250 years ago. A Miss Bishop, one of the early Methodist lay leaders, wrote to our founder, John Wesley, complaining of disappointments. Wesley replied with this single sentence: “You look inward too much and upward too little.” (Feb. 16, 1771 in The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., John Emory, 1831)

Whatever fear or loneliness we suffer from, whatever malady we experience in searching for meaning, we have found a cure. The name of the cure is Jesus Christ, and the medicine is his Church, the Body of Christ.

What are we doing as a church to “look up?” How are we finding opportunity in the challenge of a post-pandemic world and declining interest in institutional religion? A story is told of two shoe salespeople sent to a tropical climate to develop a new market. It was not long before one texted back to the home office, “*The situation here is impossible and there is no market for our product. No one here wears shoes.*” The other salesperson texted back to the same home office with the report: “*How exciting! The field is wide open! Nobody here has shoes!*” How do we see our neighborhood and the world around us? As disinterested? Or wide open?

This is what we’re digging into next Sunday with VISION 2024. Paraphrasing the hymn, “*What more can I say than to you I have said?*” Please come! It will be a great meal: hot, yummy! Worship will be shorter so that our exciting vision can be presented and still have you on your way by 1 p.m. And there’s a surprise waiting in it all.

It always intrigues me when people tell me what they ***don't*** believe. They don't believe in God, they don't believe in the Church, we're all a bunch of hypocrites, and so forth. My response is, *"Okay, so let's have a conversation: what do you believe?"* What are you willing to sacrifice for? What are you willing to stake your life on? Paul Tillich, a 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, asked, *"What is your ultimate concern?"* And having identified that, what are you doing about it?

Is that all there is to it? No, of course not. We have to listen twice as much as we speak, honoring the old adage of why we have two ears but only one mouth. Our critics have observations important for our spiritual growth. Out of fairness to our detractors, Christians of all stripes need to do Step 4 of the 12-Step program: *"a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."* Far too many Christians have been part of the anti-science, anti-vaccination movement. We seem to have forgotten that science tells us "how" and religion tells us "why." Christians have too often sold our birthright for a pot of stew (**Genesis 25:29-34**) by placing individual liberty ahead of the common good. We are not just individual believers, but a **community** that looks out for one another and for the world Christ came to save.

As believers, we also need to up our game in trusting God. A former parishioner of mine is an avid scuba diver. He once described a "drift dive" to me. He said, *"You ride the current that allows you to move incredibly quickly into the depth and beauty of the sea with very little effort."* He went on to say that this was much like his own faith journey: when he relaxed and floated he experienced great serenity; resisting the flow were times of greatest difficulty.

Does this contradict my story of the herring run, striving against the current to reach a goal? No. For each of us, it is a matter of balance. After all, a scuba diver must eventually swim to the surface. The Christian journey is a balance between letting go and letting God on the one hand, and stepping up to serve, even at personal sacrifice, on the other hand. The vows of membership we take bind us to one another and to God. In the words of Dr. David Lowes Watson from the *"Disciple Bible Study"* series: *"we are*

*willingly bound in a moment of strength so that in a moment of weakness we cannot be unbound."*

While there will be times when it seems nothing has changed and we are disappointed, we take hope in Jesus' words in today's Gospel: *"wait until you are clothed with power."* Not "if," but "until." The power will come. The help will be there. God's companionship will be revealed in surprising and life-changing ways, sometimes from people and circumstances we least expect. *"Whatever comes down must go up."* Our Lord has come down to earth to reveal godly love, hope and power. Now he goes up and, with him, our hearts and hope go up, close to God, to the companionship our souls long for and the meaning our lives crave. Look up, lift up! Amen.