

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
May 24, 2009 (Ascension Sunday)
Acts 1:1-11
Look Up!

I read two things this past week that had nothing to do with the Ascension of Jesus Christ and had everything to do with it. The first was in a book review of a novel about small-time crooks and two-bit gangsters, groups which the reviewer contrasted with big-time crooks like Bernie Madoff who were recently in all the headlines. Here's the opening paragraph from the review:

Let's get one thing straight: The difference between the Bernie Madoffs of the world, the creepy subprime mortgage shufflers, and the small-time crook, the petty gambler isn't simply a matter of degree. For one thing, the Madoffs of the world aren't funny. There's nothing humorous about guys who destroy lives and slip off into an oblivion of wealth while leaving the status quo in tatters.¹

For months now the media has analyzed the current recession with graphs that show how much money the stock market has lost, statistics that tell how many people are now out of work, and photographs of angry car dealers forced to close their showrooms or of long lines of people waiting to be admitted to local job fairs. It's true that people have cut back on spending and charitable giving; many are unemployed or know people who are out of work. At some level the bad economy mess has touched all our lives.

We tend to react to this bad news with cynicism or anger. We read about the banks getting bailouts and shady mortgages given to people who could never repay their loans and we cynically say, "That's just how the financial world is. People find loopholes in the laws so they can make a quick buck. Then they get caught and everything collapses for a while until a new loophole is found and the whole cycle starts over again. Nothing ever changes." Or we look for a fall guy, someone to blame, and say angrily, "Everything was great until the mortgage banks cooked their books and sleazy characters like Madoff got rich off of Ponzi schemes. Now look at the mess they've put us in. It's all their fault."

The beauty of feeling cynical or angry about the recession is that it lets us off the hook. If hard times are cyclical or brought about by a few rotten apples, then we don't have to look closely at our own role in the sad drama. We don't have to ask how we benefited from the stock market rallies, how we were silent as executive pay rose even as corporate responsibility plummeted, how we liked being a consumer culture spending more than we earned by the creative juggling of rollover debt on our credit cards. The book reviewer said, "There's nothing funny about Madoff and subprime mortgage hustlers who destroy lives and leave the status quo in tatters." But as the good book says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Things have happened over the past months to expose just how much the status quo had been reduced to tatters; how our economic (and therefore also our ethical) house had been largely erected upon a foundation of sand and not of solid rock. All of this stands in stark contrast to the story of the Ascension, an act which did not leave the status quo in tatters, but rather elevated the status quo literally to new heights of glory. You might assume that when the men and women standing around witnessed Jesus being taken from their midst, they would have been sad or disappointed. But at the end of Luke's gospel, it says that "while Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Lk 24:51-2). This departure ceremony was never just a description of a beloved teacher going away to a distant place in the sky; rather it was seen as part of Jesus' continuing glorification, moving him beyond the limits of immediate space and time so that he might be Lord of all human life, of all peoples at that moment and forevermore.² There is now no place where Jesus is not Lord: No place in your heart, in your inner life, in your financial or social life, in our global lives. To a world in tatters – a place of crucifixion crosses and Roman oppressors on the throne back then, a place of credit crises and generals, politicians and suits still skirting the law today – Christ came, he rose from the dead, and then ascended into heaven that his light might vanquish all darkness, and our entire status quo would be offered true healing at last.

The second thing I read came from a touching essay by Daphne Merkin who spoke about her lifelong battle with depression. She describes this disease as a psychological dungeon – a place with a familiar musty smell, a familiar lack of light, where others are at best shadowy presences, urging you to come out and rejoin the world, to go for a movie or get a bite to eat, to cheer up. She said she's sat in shrinks' offices for four decades now talking about her wish to die the way other people might talk about their wish to find true love.³ Then she made this comment:

In some way, the quiet terror of severe depression never entirely passes once you've experienced it. It hovers behind the scenes, placated temporarily by medication and renewed energy, waiting to slither back in, unnoticed by others. It tugs at you, keeping you from ever being fully at ease. It sits in the space behind your eyes, making its presence felt even in those moments when other, light matters are at the forefront of your mind.

I am struck by her description of how depression "sits in the space behind your eyes." It is a remark that could be linked to many things in our lives – depression, alcoholism, memories of abuse, feelings of grief, feelings of guilt. We sometimes call these things our "personal baggage," but that metaphor isn't accurate. Baggage can be put down or stowed away somewhere. But some memories and pain never fully leave us. They sit in the space behind our eyes; they lurk in our peripheral vision never quite forgotten; or they move to the front of our eyes as a filter coloring everything we see.

The language of faith is honest about what it means to be human. The Psalms talk about walking in the “valley of the shadow of death.” The apostle Paul talks about how “we do not do the things we want, but do the very thing we hate” (Romans 7:15). God knows what we say out loud as well as what is spoken in our secret inner monologues. God sees our public performances even as God is aware of what we keep hidden from others. God knows what sits in the space behind your eyes.

That is why the message of the Ascension offers us hope and healing. Preacher Barbara Lundblad has pointed out something insightful. At the end of the gospels and the beginning of the book of Acts, it seems that Jesus is never where he’s supposed to be. He was buried, but then he wasn’t in the tomb – he had risen and gone to Galilee. Later, Jesus was no longer on earth, but he had risen beyond the clouds, beyond human sight. Lundblad says, “it seems that to be with Jesus means to be somewhere other than where we are now.”⁴

Jesus calls us to a new place, a new way of life. We preachers use that language all the time – the old is gone, the new has come. But part of how we find this new place is that we learn to look at the world differently. We stop focusing on the space behind our eyes. We stop giving priority to the images burned onto the backs of our retinas – the pain, loss, and disappointment that linger in our emotional peripheral vision. For me, the dominant image of the Ascension passage is that of the disciples jostling one another, straining to see where Jesus has gone – staring into the clouds, peering up toward heaven, longing for another glimpse of the risen Christ. By definition it means they are not looking at themselves, not fixating on their own issues, their own limited world view, their own dungeon with its familiar musty smell and confining walls.

As a preacher I spend a fair amount of time insisting that heaven is not up in the clouds somewhere. Like the angels in white robes, we ministers nudge our congregations and say, “Why do you stand around looking up toward heaven? There’s plenty to be done right here on earth. There’s pain and doubt and violence and fear all around you. There are also places of joy and hope and love awaiting you nearby. Wake up! The kingdom of God is in your midst.” But for today I’m going to change my tune. On this day spend some time looking up. Imagine the risen Christ ascending into the clouds. Imagine what Christ’s vantage point is now when he looks back to earth and sees the world from a heavenly perspective. Look up – stare not at the space behind your eyes, but at the space before your eyes – the literal expanse of heaven and earth spread out before you as you see the world through the eyes of Christ. The risen and ascended Christ.

In that redirected vision is life and healing and hope. It is like the hymn of St. Patrick, which begins this way:

*I arise today through the strength of Christ’s birth with His baptism,
Through the strength of His crucifixion with His burial,
Through the strength of His resurrection with His ascension...
I arise today through a mighty strength, God the Trinity, the Creator of Creation.*⁵

Look up! The status quo is not in tatters, but has been transformed by an empty tomb and victory over death. There is now no place where Jesus is not Lord. The space behind our eyes need not dominate all we see, for our eyes have been re-focused on an act of ascension that shows us the world from a loving, heavenly perspective. O bless the risen and ascended Lord, O my soul; let all that is within me bless God's holy name.

AMEN

¹ David Means, "The Way of the Gun", Review of Denis Johnson's Nobody Move, *New York Times Book Review*, May 10, 2009, p. 6. (Review slightly edited.)

² Cf. David P. Scaer, "Jesus Did Not Leave – He Reigns Through Us," *Christianity Today*, May 21, 1982.

³ Daphne Merkin, *New York Times Magazine*, May 10, 2009, p. 32.

⁴ Barbara K. Lundblad, "Footprints on the Earth," *Day 1*, May 8, 2005.

⁵ Kuno Meyer, trans., The Deer's Cry: Early Irish Lyric Poetry, Mockingbird.creighton.edu.