

# Going Up?

[Luke 24: 44-53]

"Stay here in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

K Karpen, Sunday, May 8, 2005

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Ascension Sunday

Mother's Day

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"When Jesus had said this, as the apostles were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." Acts 1:9

The other day I found myself at St. Luke's Hospital. I was on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, and I needed to get up to the 9<sup>th</sup>. I pushed the elevator button and waited. Before long, the elevator came. The arrow lights over the elevator weren't working, so I asked a man who was standing in the elevator, "Going up?" The man nodded. I got on. The doors closed. The elevator went down. It went down some more. I looked over at my deceiver. He was totally unconcerned. The elevator passed the first floor & kept going. When it reached "B," the doors opened. The man smiled at me, nodded and left.

How often do I go through experiences like that! Maybe not literally, with elevators and all. But how often do I latch onto someone or something I think will pick me up and take me to a higher place. I hop on to hope, only to find myself back in the basement.

I recently listened to the activist Joe Churner--the man who brought us the smoke-free workplace, among other things--describe his struggle with depression, from the time he first became aware of it, to the paralyzing effect it had on his life, to his long and seemingly hopeless treatment for his depression. He, too, spoke of this elevator image; but his was an elevator without a basement.

He said, "I felt like I was in an elevator on a free fall. I wondered when I would reach the bottom, and I kept bracing myself for the crash. After a while, as the elevator went further and further below the surface, I changed my mind, and I began praying for it to crash."

"I began praying for it to crash." It is a feeling not un-common among those who live with the disease of depression. But it is a feeling that others may relate to as well. I wonder if that is how the eleven apostles felt as they watched Jesus go away from them, withdraw further from them, as they watched him ascend from them.

I wonder if they had the sense, as I do when I read these stories of the ascension in Luke and Acts, that somehow Jesus is staying put, and that they are sinking, sinking, further and further from him--as time goes on and the reality sinks in that they will have to lead their lives far from him, that they will have to do their work far from his presence. That they will have to be witnesses to him without seeing him any more.

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The apostles had thought they'd be riding an elevator up and out of their predicament; up and out of their situation; up and out of danger, death, decay, and depression, and instead they were going down--far from Jesus, far from God. The 40 days were over. And I wonder: Is that what Ascension Day is really about? A moment to mark, after all, how different we are from Jesus, how far we are from God, how very stuck we are in the things that pull us into the depths of ourselves?

The answer is no. For now, take my word for it; the answer is no. And the reason it's no is that the ascension doesn't stand alone but is embedded in its context. In its context, the ascension stands as the hinge point, the pivot point, between the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. In its context, the ascension stands as the pivot point between what Jesus did, and what the apostles will do. In its context, the ascension stands in the middle of the whole history of God's salvation. The ascension is a postlude to the promise and a prelude to power. A postlude to promise and a prelude to power.

Luke tells two stories about the ascension, and we've heard them both this morning. In the Gospel of Luke, Luke finishes the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection with the story of his departure from his disciples, leading them out to Bethany, lifting up his hands, blessing them, withdrawing from them and being carried, Elijah-like, up into heaven.

In Luke's second book, the sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke begins the story of the early church with the same story, told a bit differently. The apostles listen to him, they watch, he is lifted up, and he disappears into a cloud. In Acts, 2 men in white robes appear and ask them why they stand staring up, and they tell them that Jesus will return.

In Luke, Luke tells us that the apostles are anything but depressed: They return to Jerusalem "with great joy, and are continually in the temple blessing God." By the time he sits down to write Acts a decade or so later, Luke has gotten more practical. The apostles return to Jerusalem and hold a charge conference to elect a replacement for Judas whose faith journey had taken him in an unfortunate direction.

But if you look at these two stories for their similarities rather than their differences, you will find that the ascension of Jesus is a postlude to promise and a prelude to power. Jesus speaks of two things, and he speaks about them in each of the two

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stories. First, Jesus speaks of the promise of God. He reminds them that God has promised to be with them no matter what. God has promised to love them no matter what. God has promised to stick with them no matter what.

That promise undergirds everything they are and anything they will be asked to do: They are not alone. Jesus may not be there in front of them talking to them, but they are not alone. They may not be carried up to new heights in their lives, but they are not alone. They may, in fact, find themselves carried down to life's basement, but they will not be alone.

They may find that in order to be true and effective witnesses to God & the Gospel—the Greek word for 'witness' is martyr, after all—they will be called by God to go willingly to the basement of life and below, to wherever people might be found who can no longer cling to hope. But even there and especially there they will never be alone because God is there ahead of them. That is the promise of God. And the ascension—is just the postlude to that promise.

The second half of Jesus' Ascension Day message to them, and to us, is that his departure is just a prelude: a prelude to power. "Stay here in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." Or in the Acts version: "...You will receive power when the holy spirit has come upon me and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea & Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." What do they have to do to receive that power? Nothing. Stay put. Stay available. Be present.

What kind of power will it be? He doesn't say. Because he doesn't have to. Because it is the kind of power he himself has been living and breathing the whole time he's been with them. Not power the way we think of power—not a triumphalistic power, but a broad, giving, holistic power fueled by grace. Compelled by compassion. Not power over people but power for, power with people. Not power to repel terror through fear, but power to dispel terror through love. Not power for individual gain, but power precisely for individual loss, and the gain only of grace to give more. That kind of power. God's power. Spirit's power. Pentecost power. And that's what we need. That's what you and I need. That's what the church needs. That's what the world needs. God's power. Spirit's power. Pentecost power.

Whatever floor we're on, wherever life's elevator has landed us, we're not far from God. We're not far from love. We're not far from each other. We're not far from Pentecost. We're not far from power. If you're in the basement, take heart! You're

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not far from God's power. If you find yourself on the top, God bless you. Even then, you're not far from God's power. If you have no idea what floor you're on, because the lights are out & you can't tell what's going down from what's going up... If you're stuck between floors, and you've been there forever, take heart!! You are not far from the promise and the power of God. Amen!