

## ONWARD AND UPWARD

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*While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"*  
(Acts 1:10-11a)

If your experience with email is anything like mine, friends and family will often forward to you mass messages that are semi-inspirational and perhaps only semi-true. One that came to me recently is from my mother, and she encouraged me to use it in a sermon. Since I always do what my mother says, this is your lucky day. It's called "The Buzzard, the Bat, and the Bumblebee." A buzzard is a large, predatory bird like a hawk or a vulture. Apparently, if you put a buzzard in a pen that is approximately seven by seven feet and completely open at the top, the buzzard will remain in the pen even though it is an expert flyer. The reason is, the buzzard doesn't look upward, but only straight ahead, or onward at take-off time. Seeing its way blocked in all directions, it won't even attempt flight.

The same is purportedly true for the bat and the bumblebee. The bat is a remarkable flying creature, but it can't or won't take flight from a level surface, even with the whole sky open to it. Only by being able to look downward, and throw itself off a drop can a bat become airborne. And as for the bumblebee, the email claims that if you catch one in a glass jar, set the jar on the ground and take the lid off, the bumblebee won't look or fly upward. Instead it will search and search the bottom and the sides of the jar until someone either sets it free or it dies. The point is, look up and live. The bit about the buzzard and the bat I can accept. But as for the plight of the bumblebee, I find it hard to believe, and will consider only to be semi-true until further investigation. When I was growing up I caught plenty of bumblebees, and they never seemed to have any trouble escaping. What is more, they often stung me on the way out for good measure.

Last Thursday came and went with many of us probably not realizing that it was a major feast of the Christian year: Ascension Day. The Ascension of Jesus commemorates the event forty days after the first Easter when the risen Jesus departed from the company of the disciples. The Book of Acts tells us that in the presence of the disciples, Jesus was *lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight*. He just rose into the air until he disappeared into the clouds. What could it mean? Is it true or only semi-true? In theological terms, to say that Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God is to confess something profound: that human nature ascends with him, that God has taken us up too. The whole created order of flesh and blood is not written off or ultimately lost to the grave due to the fall from grace. Rather, the mission of Jesus was always to reclaim that which was lost – the essential you and me and this whole world which God loves. Now to be seated means that Jesus' work is done. He has prepared a place for us. Heaven and earth shall be one, as Jesus and the Father are one.

However, any such meaning of the Ascension is obscured by its manner. Indeed, the picture has always presented enormous problems for believers, so much so that we at best consider it to be only semi-true. We could accept Jesus' walking off into the mist, or riding off in a cloud of dust, or even disappearing into the ether. Onward is fine, but upward? Rising up in a cloud? We get stuck on the gravity thing. Apparently, so did the disciples. The writer of Acts describes how they stood there looking up, with their eyes gazing in the general direction of

heaven, watching the place in the clouds where Jesus disappeared. Perhaps a misquote from a former parishioner of mine is the best we can do: “Well,” he said wisely, “the Lord moves in *mischievious ways*.”

Make of the Ascension what you will. Whether it’s mysterious or “mischievious,” true or semi-true, don’t let the manner trump the meaning. Ultimately, we don’t believe in Jesus because of the Ascension. Rather, we believe in the Ascension because of Jesus. Put another way, we don’t argue from the Ascension to Jesus. We argue from Jesus to whatever truth is being expressed through the Ascension. That being said, something about the Ascension touches a deep chord in me, and perhaps in you. We look up and yearn for transcendence. We desire to rise above the ordinary, to soar beyond the petty, to shake the limitations of gravity, time, and space. I hear the story of Jesus on Ascension Day and a big part of me says, “I want to do that, too!”

I’ve read that in the early days of aviation, people attached great spiritual significance to what was then our newfound ability to soar through the air. In 1916, Alfred Lawson was an aviation engineer and editor of *Aviation* magazine. His bold prediction was that the new age of flight would eventually evolve us into “*a superior type of man – a superhuman who will live in the upper stratas of the atmosphere and never come down to earth at all.*” The arrival of the space age just a few decades later only put rocket fuel in the quest to look up and reach up and achieve transcendence. Wally Shirra was a test pilot and early astronaut in the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs. He had this to say about being weightless: *It’s so many things together. A feeling of pride, of healthy solitude, of dignified freedom from everything that’s dirty, sticky. You feel exquisitely comfortable ... and you feel you have so much energy, such an urge to do things. And you work well, yes, you think well, without sweat, without difficulty as if the biblical curse “in the sweat of thy face and in sorrow” no longer exists. As if you’ve been born again.*

In today’s reading from the Gospel of John (17:1-11), we’ve heard how Jesus allowed his disciples to listen in on one of his prayers. Jesus wanted his disciples to overhear because he was praying about them, and he was praying about how all our yearnings for ultimate freedom and transcendence may be fulfilled. He looked up to heaven and prayed, “*And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*” To be born again, to receive eternal life requires looking up – looking up to heaven and knowing God through Jesus. One of Norman Rockwell’s lesser known paintings is entitled, “Lift Up Thine Eyes.” The painting depicts the great gothic façade of St. Thomas Church just uptown. Rockwell captures the soaring arches, the carved saints aspiring towards heaven, and even a column of birds that look more like heavenly doves than city pigeons ascending into the sky. Strangely, though, like the buzzard and the bat and the bumblebee, the pedestrians on the sidewalk all have downcast eyes and hunched over shoulders as if the weight of the world were pressing them to the pavement. “Lift up thine eyes,” says Norman Rockwell, quoting the Psalmist. Look up and receive eternal life from God, says Jesus.

We wonder if such transcendence is only the domain of astronauts and mystics. Concerning the latter, mystics are those faithful souls in every generation who claim first-hand contact with God. They look up and see the Lord and hear his Word and feel his presence. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting upon his throne, high and lifted up. St. Paul wrote that he knew “*a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know. God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise ... and he heard things which cannot be told, which man may not utter.*” Is it true or semi-true? It had better be true – not true in the flat, literal sense of the fundamentalists, but true in the expanded sense of God’s kingdom, true in the sense that love and beauty are true. If it isn’t true, then we of all people are most to be pitied. We need mystics in our midst to bear

witness to the Goal of our desire. No church is complete without people whose souls and bodies have been so consecrated that they can bear witness to contact with God. In her book, Mystics of the Church, Evelyn Underhill, the Anglican author of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century calls mystics “the eyes of the Body of Christ. They maintain that awestruck outlook towards the Infinite, and that warmly loving sense of God’s indwelling grace, without which all religious institutions quickly become mechanical and cold.”

We need the mystics and feasts like Ascension Day. Even the best of us need the bracing, refreshing reminders they bring. A story is told about Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, two theology professors and intellectual giants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Tillich died, word came to Barth, and what this one man who had pondered heaven all his life said about the other was this: “Well, now he knows.” Therein lies one of the tensions of the Christian life. On the one hand, we know we have been created to look up, and that our souls shrivel if we don’t. On the other hand, we find that in the time of this mortal life, all of our looking, reaching, rocketing, and aspiring will never gain the altitude that our souls desire. We are left to gaze toward heaven, and wonder where it is that Jesus went, knowing full well we will need new definitions for the words “where” and “is” to formulate any answer.

This brings me back to disciples, on the mount called Olivet, near Jerusalem. You heard how two men in white robes appeared to them and said, “*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*” The subtle hint here was that Jesus was not going to be falling out of the clouds anytime soon. It was time for the disciples to break from looking upward and move onward. It was time to go be the church that Jesus empowered them to be. Jesus had promised that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, power to carry on the mission and ministry of Jesus: to heal and to reconcile, to bind up the broken hearted, to feed and clothe the poor, to love the earth and its people. It’s been said that the greatest achievement of the Apollo space program was not the discovery of the moon, but rather the discovery of the Earth. All of the astronauts who ascended into the heavens and landed on another world, looked back on the Earth they had left behind and were startled – transfixed by the bright blue globe alone in emptiness of outer space. They felt a deep homesickness for the Earth, and newfound appreciation of it. They beamed back pictures of Earth from a vantage point no one had ever seen, and some say the environmental movement was born right then. People realized that the hope of humankind was down here as much as answers were to be found up there.

The Ascension of Jesus can bring us to our senses in a similar way. From a higher vantage point, from God’s perspective, we see the sanctity of life and the fragility of the Earth. In today’s reading from John, Jesus prayed that we *not* be taken out of this world. In fact, Jesus prayed that we be *sanctified* – or set apart – for the work of God in the world. *As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world*, is what Jesus prayed to God just beyond today’s reading. In other words, we may not be of this world, but we are in it. We may be citizens of heaven, but for now we are inhabitants of earth. We may have an inner longing to look up, but our calling often is to look down and see a world of misery at our feet. And not just see it, but do something about it. So the Ascension’s calling is not only upward, but onward.

If you see some dirt under my fingernails today when you come forward to receive Communion, it’s because the Warings have been busy tending to the flower beds around the rectory this weekend. As we were carrying flats of vinka flowers and impatiens from the green market at Union Square, preparing to press the little plants into the earth, I recalled once hearing a passage by the author E.B. White, who wrote a touching tribute to his wife Katharine in the introduction to her book on gardening. The passage eluded me, so I washed my hands and went to the Strand, and I now possess what I’m told is a minor classic in its genre: *Onward and*

*Upward in the Garden*, by Katharine S. White. This is what E.B. White wrote about the great day every year when his wife would plant the bulb garden:

As the years went by and age overtook her, there was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion – the small, hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection.

Calmly plotting the resurrection. With one phrase E.B. White beautifully captures the mission of the church. In the midst of calmly plotting the resurrection down here, don't forget to "lift up thine eyes" to where Christ has gone to be seated at the right hand of God. For those of us whom Jesus calls his own, Ascension Day reminds us that it's both onward and upward in the garden.

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The quotes by Alfred Lawson and Wally Schirra are found in [Rocket Dreams](#), by Marina Benjamin, 2003.