

## ***“Why Do You Stand Looking Up Toward Heavens?”***

Acts 1:1-11

*As we seek your word for us today  
grant us the faith that we need, O God. Amen.*

The Sunday before Pentecost is celebrated as Ascension Sunday, celebrating the day when Jesus ascended from earth to heaven according to the Scripture. Ascension Day is 40 days after Easter – so the date is also movable like the Holy Week and this year the 40<sup>th</sup> day falls on May 1. The story of Ascension is not that popular among Protestants. Roman Catholics and Orthodox churches mark this occasion significantly. We are more familiar with the movement from Easter Sunday to Pentecost.

But ascension is an integral part of Jesus story. In fact, scriptural references abound and it is explicitly mentioned in the Apostles Creed. One section is devoted to this story in the creed - *He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.*

What Luke wrote in the Book of Acts is the most elaborate description of what happened. During the 40 day period after the resurrection the risen Lord appeared to many, Luke speaks about “convincing proofs.” However, Jesus’ ascension was witnessed only by the apostles.

In the story Jesus was giving instructions to the apostles to wait for the promise of the gift of the spirit and commissioned them to be his witnesses from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and all the ends of the earth. According to the story, while he was talking and as the apostles were watching in v. 9 it says, *“he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight....”* Reading the account today, we could not help but ask many questions – questions of facts and questions about meaning.

Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut who was the first to venture into outer space and the first to orbit the earth, was quoted to have said, *“I don’t see any God up there.”* As a child he was baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church and would have known the Ascension story. Full verbatim record of Gagarin’s space flight did

not contain such a quote. It was however traced to Nikita Krushnchev's speech in one of the anti-religious propaganda during the plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Russia.

“The God Up There” is quite a challenge for us today who is capable of exploring the outer space way beyond what our eyes can see. Today, we have a range of opinions about the ascension story from various theological standpoints – ranging from denials to affirmation. The challenge for each of us today is to embrace the whole Biblical witness about Jesus and not cut into pieces and select only those that we think we can believe or we are comfortable with. If we believe that Jesus has risen from the dead then what is it that holds us back to believe that he ascended into heaven?

The Heidelberg Catechism, the primer used by the Churches during the reformation dealt with this issue. In a question and answer format – it outlines what Protestant believes.\_

**Q. What do you confess when you say, he ascended into heaven?**

A. That Christ, while His disciples watched, was lifted up from earth to heaven, and will be there for our good until He comes again to judge the living and the dead.

**Q. But isn't Christ with us until the end of the world, as he promised us?**

A. Christ is truly human and truly God. In his human nature Christ is not now on earth; but in his divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit he is not absent from us for a moment.

**Q. If his humanity is not present wherever his divinity is, then aren't the two natures of Christ separated from each other?**

A. Certainly not. Since divinity is not limited and is present everywhere, it is evident that Christ's divinity is surely beyond the bounds of the humanity he has taken on, but at the same time his divinity is in and remains personally united to his humanity.

**Q. How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us?**

A. First, he pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father. Second, we have our own flesh in heaven – as a guarantee that Christ, our head, will take us, his members, to himself in heaven. Third, he sends his Spirit to us on earth as a further

guarantee. By the Spirit's power we make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but the things above where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand. (Vol. 1 *Our Only Comfort, A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* by Fred H. Klooster, pp. 590-591)\_

If you follow through the catechism, the doctrine of Christ's ascension deals with the question of Jesus' nature as human and divine. The crucified and the risen Christ is truly human and he is also truly divine. The confession of the church is that the proof of his divinity is his ascension to heaven, as testified by our text today.

All through the years the church has fought false teachings about Jesus that either deny or affirm just a portion of his nature either his humanity or his divinity. The church asserts that Jesus is truly human and truly divine! Christ's ascension also is very important to Protestants, John Calvin, one of the Protestant Reformers in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, wrote that "*Christ left us in such a way that his presence might be more useful to us — a presence that had been confined in a humble abode of flesh so long as he sojourned on earth ... As his body was raised up above all the heavens, so his power and energy were diffused and spread beyond all the bounds of heaven and earth.*"

Marcus Borg puts it this way; "*he is no longer restricted to or confined to our dimensions of time or space, as he was in his historical lifetime.*" Why the ascension, I ask myself? The risen Christ has to ascend into heaven so that the Holy Spirit can descend upon us and we can do our task to be witness unto the ends of the earth.

Going back to the text, my attention was caught by what Luke recorded in vs. 10-11:

*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? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."*

The question of the men in white robes, presumably angels struck me – “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” This could also a question for us today. Shall we just stand and look into the heavens forever – enjoy the ecstatic vision of Jesus rising up to heaven or wait for the clouds to break hoping to see Jesus again descending from heaven?\_

Our calling is not to stand and look toward heaven – Jesus ordered us to wait for the spirit and to work to be a witness. We have a task to do and definitely it is not about gazing at the clouds but going to all the corners of the world to proclaim the good news.

Jesus reminds us to wait for the promise before we engage in the work of witnessing. We have a problem if the church would spend its energy speculating on when the clouds will break for Jesus to come again. The scripture is very clear on this matter, “it is not for us to know...” But there are those who spend their energy “cracking the code” and speak about specifics about the world’s end and the date of Christ’s return. Do you know that there are two failed predictions for the year 2008?\_

1. 2008-MAR-21: After a lengthy calculation based on the Bible, a British group, The Lord's Witnesses, has concluded that the start of Armageddon will happen on this day. Three quarters of the world's population will die during the subsequent war. This will be preceded by the United Nations taking over complete control of the world in the lunar month preceding 2001-APR-24. This is exactly 666 Hebrew months after the founding of the United Nations in 1945. (*"The date of Armageddon without using the code,"* The Lord's Witnesses, at: <http://www.bibledecoded.com/understanding16.html>)

\_2. 2008-APR-6: Philip B. Brown incorrectly predicted that the Great Tribulation would start on 2001-APR-7, with the appearance of the two witnesses described in Revelation. He also predicted that the start of Jesus' millennial reign would be on 2008-APR-6. (Unsolicited E-mail from "*Paul*" at 888leon888\_@mail.ru )

With all the problems and uncertainties around us, many are tempted to disengage from the world and be contented to simply look at the heavens for signs.

We have a problem if the church does not listen to instructions, and just jump into the world without the empowerment of the spirit that Christ speaks about. The rhythm of the life Christian life includes listening, waiting and working with God. We are sent into the world to be witnesses not by ourselves alone, we are sent with God's spirit.

So what does the story of Ascension has to do with us? Now that Christ has ascended we are charge not to look at the heavens but to look at the whole wide world, to the Jerusalem, the Judea, the Samaria and ends of the earth of today. We are charge to look at each other and to go to where God leads us.

Ascension to me is a signal to move on. It is a time to look into the future. At times we cannot move on because we always look back. We look back either to reminisce the past glory or put the blame on others on our present condition. Ascension is putting an end of the past so that we move on to another chapter of God's story of redemption. The story this time involves all of us who believe in Christ.

Why Do You Stand Looking Up Toward Heavens? This question is in my heart today. Jesus has ascended and it points to us that today those who want to seek Jesus shall see him not in the clouds but in the life and witness of those who are empowered by God's Spirit until that day when he returns to judge the living and dead. In the mean time, let us stop gazing at the clouds and start working for Christ as instructed! Amen.

Ascension Sunday  
May 4, 2008

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**Ascension Sunday**  
May 4, 2008 – 1:30 P.M.

Preacher: Rev. Reuben D. Cedino  
Sermon: "*Why Do You Stand Looking Up Toward  
Heavens?*"

SCRIPTURE READING:

*1st Reading: Acts 1:1-11*

*Gospel: Luke 24:44-53*

Anthem: "Come Unto Me"

*Fil-Am UCC Choir*

Liturgist: Ms. Debbie B. Villanueva

Pianist: Ms. Jean Nabong

Offertory Solo: Ms. TJ Mecerido

Organist and Choral Director: Ms. Rachel A. Dadap

Mr. Joel Pal, *Elder-in-Charge*

Mr. Joel Pal and Ed Olvina, *Communion Servers*

Ms. Dinah Neri, *Steward-in-Charge*

Ms. Jennifer Pal, *Trustee-in-Charge*

Mr. & Ms. Sony & Lily Manalo, *Ushers*

Mr. & Mrs. Boyet & Debbie Villanueva

and Dr. & Mrs. Romy & Prossy Dagdayan, *Floral Offering*