

May 29, 2022  
Ascension of Our Lord  
United, Oak Park

### **Not Just Gazing at the Sky**

Growing up in the rural heartland of the midwest, which is wonderful land for raising crops but not generally known for its scenic beauty, the various times that our family visited parks along high bluffs of the Mississippi River were great thrills. One of those places is Pikes Peak State Park near McGregor, Iowa. Though it is named for the fabled explorer Zebulon Pike, whose party visited that spot in 1805, most people would be *more familiar* with the Pikes Peak of Colorado, at a much higher elevation.

Still, visiting the Iowa Pikes Peak with a commanding view of the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers below, was exciting enough for me as a young child. Grain barges passing by on the river with their cargo bound for the Gulf of Mexico, and who knows where in the world beyond, were fascinating to see and think about where all those products might be going.

Indeed, going up to nearly any height that allows us to see things beyond our most immediate surroundings will give us some new

perspectives, and I've often thought about Jesus' ascension to heaven in a similar way.

While it's hard for we who live in an era that has completed a number of space explorations to imagine a specific place in the cosmos where Jesus was headed, the story of the ascension serves as a nice prologue to the book of Acts. In his travel above the earth's surface, Jesus would have seen all of the countries to which his disciples would eventually be traveling. Indeed, we heard about many of those places in recent weeks as we read from portions of the book of Acts that had us traveling to Syria and parts of Macedonia. According to tradition, all of Jesus' apostles embarked on missions to some rather far-flung places, and established churches throughout the Roman Empire, as well as throughout the Middle East, Africa, and India.

Though the direction at the beginning of the book of Acts is about Jesus' *upward* movement, the book quickly pivots to a more *outward* thrust as the disciples disperse themselves following the day of Pentecost.

So just where did Jesus go at the time of the ascension? He went somewhere beyond where the disciples could go immediately, and in many ways this seems to have typified what he was *always* doing in his earthly ministry. Think of Jesus meeting with teachers in the synagogue when he was only twelve years old and how he astounded them all. Or think of how Jesus extended the boundaries of his work to include Samaritans who were the people that sort of lived on the other side of the tracks in the first century.

Think of Jesus being raised from the dead on Easter and then going quickly to Galilee, as Matthew and Mark reported the events of that day. And think of the ways in which crowds clamored to see Jesus, to have him heal them of their ailments, or to hear his new interpretation of the ancient faith of Israel. Jesus was constantly moving above and beyond. He continually gave a new perspective on the world and its many challenges.

I think it's no accident that the story of the ascension is told at the *outset* of the book of Acts, which on the whole is an amazing story of the global expansion in the earliest days of the Christian church. And along

the way Jesus' disciples had to consider what it was that *truly bound them together as a community*, was it their faithfulness to the *old covenant* that required circumcision and keeping the many laws of the Torah, or was this a *new community* called into being by the Holy Spirit and bound to a new way of life around Jesus?

Well, we know what the outcome was. The church quickly grew beyond the confines of Israel and beyond the strictest interpretations about who was a child of Abraham. The new religious community was built out of love, and grace, and inclusion. Not bound to just one tribe. Not bound to a particular language. Not bound to a given continent. Not bound to gender or class. And so it has come to include us, wherever we and our ancestors may have come from.

Ever increasingly, this congregation has been called through the gospel of Jesus Christ to reach out beyond the Norwegian ethnic enclave that was once at the core of its mission, to the various communities and identities that surround us today. What languages, what races, what ethnicities could be included within our reach in 2022, that simply were not possible almost a century ago? What are the spiritual longings of

people surrounding this place who are not currently involved in any of this congregation's work and ministry? We can instead consider the opportunities for working with the neighbors who are right before us now.

Even though the story about Jesus' ascension *may have us looking upward too*, just like the apostles who witnessed it in the first place, our attention is rightly averted elsewhere. "Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11, CEB). Or the men in white robes who uttered those words might also have said something like "stop gazing up at the sky and get along with the business of doing God's mission here on earth."

God isn't *just* in heaven. God is *everywhere*. And that's critical to understanding our mission. It's also critical to the church's life going forward. We can be in *this place* with its impenetrably thick walls and stained glass windows and heavy wooden doors, but it isn't until we go *out* from this place that the real work of Christ's mission has begun.

I've often recalled how the work we have been doing with Chicago Church of Christ, probably our most significant partner these last several years, began when some of us were cleaning up after an end of summer, back-to-school event that we had on the church lawn. Just being *twenty feet outside the building* gave us an opportunity to interact with members of that congregation who were walking down the sidewalk and stopped to say that they were looking for a place in the area to hold a Bible study, and from there the partnership has only continued to grow.

Because of our relationship with that congregation, and a few other organizations that also gather in this place, I've speculated that more people may use this building *now* in any given week, than might have been here when United Lutheran Church was at the peak of its own membership about fifty years ago. Furthermore, our recent work with A House in Austin demonstrates how our mission *is* more outwardly focused rather than just gazing upwardly at the sky. We *are* actively involved in many of the needs around us.

*(pause)*

Earlier this year, in the final weeks of the former Secretary of State, Madeline Albright's life, she was in regular communication with global leaders "about the importance of rallying 'the world against Putin's horrific invasion of Ukraine and the urgent work of defending democracy at home and around the world.'" She was also quick to re-direct callers who wanted to know how she was doing personally.

Madeline *didn't want to be bothered* by such talk. "Let's don't waste any time on that....The only thing that really matters is what kind of world we're going to leave to our grandchildren."<sup>1</sup> Not content to be focusing on her own end-of-life concerns, she kept doing the work that she had been called to do throughout so much of her life.

I think that Madeline's life was an example of something I said myself at the conclusion of another sermon not so long ago, "for as long as we have breath, we can continue to praise God, to serve our neighbors in need, and to contribute to God's mission on earth."<sup>2</sup>

*Indeed, we aren't just gazing up at the sky!*

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/27/us/politics/madeleine-albright-memorial.html?referringSource=articleShare>

<sup>2</sup>Epiphany 2 (C), January 16, 2022