

WGUMC May 8, 2016 "Ascension: Jesus Falls Upward"
Luke 24:44-53

On Mother's Day, I often look back on the day that I gave birth to my daughter and marvel at how little of it I remember. Earth-shattering events have a tendency to mess with our memory. That must be why the Gospels seem so confused about the order and timing of events on Jesus' rebirth-day. No two Gospels tell the same story about the resurrection. And the same goes for Jesus' ascension.

The books of Luke and Acts are believed to have been authored by the same person, and there is an account of the ascension in each of them. Yet in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus ascends to heaven on the very day of Easter; but in Acts, not until forty days later.

Being a middle-aged mom, I've often lost 40 days here and there, so I'm going to give the author of Luke-Acts a pass for his fuzzy memory and focus instead on the meaning of the ascension in human history, specifically our history.

The story in Luke is brief, and the first verse of it poses a question for me. Jesus is about to remind his disciples of some of the things he taught them, and he says, "These are my words that I spoke to you *while I was still with you*—" Wait a minute. Isn't Jesus still with them? Well, maybe not in quite the same way. But he has just showed them his hands and feet. He has just eaten a piece of boiled fish. So what about Jesus is different and what makes him talk about himself in the past tense?

There's the resurrection, of course. That is certainly different. We can hardly get our minds around the reality of it, but Richard Rohr gives us one way to think about it. We're still working our way through Rohr's book, "Falling Upward," and without meaning to sound flippant, I want to suggest that the story of the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus is a story about Jesus falling upward.

According to Rohr, "falling upward" is what happens to us when we go from the first half of life to the second half. Let me give you a quick recap: In the first half of life, we put our energy into building a strong container for ourselves. In the second half of life, we have to decide what to fill it with. It's not that easy. In the first half of life we are busy trying to establish an identity for ourselves. But there are so many things that get in the way, so many opportunities to fall and to fail, that we often end up with a false self. So, in the second half of life, we have to embark on what Rohr calls our "further journey" to find our self. And when we do, when we find our true self, we find God. Our life stops being just a survival dance and becomes a sacred dance.

"Falling upward" is Rohr's way of describing how we develop psychologically and spiritually to be the men and women God created us to be. But this pattern of development doesn't just apply to us. If we look at the story of Jesus' life as

told in the Gospel of Luke, we can see how this pattern holds true for him, too. I would go even further than that and claim that Christ is both the foundation and the fulfillment of this pattern. For St. Paul, Christ is the New Adam, the New Human who opens for us the way to God. [I Corinthians 15:45]

By looking at how Jesus got from the first to the second half of life, we, too, can find our way to God. Now we have just a few glimpses of the first half of Jesus' life. After the baby Jesus is presented in the temple, we read that the family returned to Nazareth and "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him." [Luke 2:40]

We hear nothing more until Jesus is twelve and gets separated from his parents while in Jerusalem for the Passover. Mary and Joseph finally find him in the temple sitting with the teachers, wowing them with his questions and his

understanding. From that time on, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." [2:52]

So Jesus spends his childhood growing and learning as we all do. The next time we hear of Jesus, he is thirty years old and he shows up on the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized. A voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." [3:22]

In Rohr's terms, Jesus has successfully navigated the first half of life. He has built the container. Now the Holy Spirit descends and fills it with God. And in that moment, Jesus embraces his true identity: he is God's Son, God's beloved one.

But holding onto that identity is challenging. Soon after this, Jesus finds himself in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. This is Jesus at his most vulnerable. He is hungry, thirsty, lonely, and the doubts creep in. These forty days with the devil is the falling down that Jesus must do before he can fall up.

But he falls even lower than this. After the devil departs, Jesus goes to Nazareth, to his home synagogue, where he speaks hard words to a hometown crowd, and they respond by trying to kill him. Now, we might think that they rejected him because he claimed to be the Messiah. But it seems to me that he didn't really become the Messiah until they rejected him. For when they were about to throw him off the cliff, he realized that he had to leave home. If he was going to be his true self and live his true life, he was going to have to take that further journey. It wasn't going to happen for him in his hometown.

Whether literally or figuratively, we all have to leave home in order to find home. Methodist ministers have moving in their DNA. I figure that the only way God can keep me growing is to keep me moving. Even folks who live in one place all their lives have to move eventually. I just found out that Stan Praisewater is moving to Washington after Alison's wedding. He's been thinking about it a long time. He has a house there, not far

from where his sisters live. He told me that he always imagined he would stay here. But the valley has changed, and he can't afford to buy out his siblings and continue living in his mother's house. Neither can James and Nicole, so they will be moving to Morgan Hill. Meanwhile, Katie and Drew Roberts are moving to Southern California. Just like the town of Nazareth, Silicon Valley seems to be rejecting its sons and daughters; so few of them can afford to live here. I just want to assure each of them that a blessed journey awaits them. For what you lose in leaving home, you gain in learning who you really are and what being home in God really means.

When Jesus left Nazareth, he began his "further journey" of falling upward to God, and that is a journey we can take with him. The longer Jesus was with his disciples, the more they came to believe that he shared the divine nature, so much so that his followers began to call him "Son of God." But here is the shocking good news: we, too, can share in the divine

nature. No, this isn't some New Age heresy. This is ancient Christianity.

Second Peter says that God's divine power has given us everything we need for life and for godliness. By knowing Christ, by holding onto the promises, we can escape the corruption of this world and "become participants of the divine nature." [2 Peter 1:4] Early Christians called it *theosis*, a Greek word meaning "deification," "divinization," or in more modern terms, "becoming one with the divine."

All of our problems, all of our sins—whether they be personal or social—are the result of our forgetting who we really are: sons and daughters of God, each made in the image of God, and with God's grace, each capable of union with God.

Falling upward is the process we go through to rediscover this fundamental truth: We are one with God. Not even death can separate us from the love of God. [Romans 8:38] So

ascension is not just what Jesus did, but what we all can do and we don't have to wait until we die to do it.

When we participate in the divine nature, when we are one with God, we are in heaven already. Wesley used to say that believers live in eternity and walk in eternity. What he meant by that is that as soon as Christ is revealed in our hearts, heaven is opened in our souls. Some people worry too much about what they need to do to get into heaven; Christ is simply trying to get heaven into us.

So whether we ascend to heaven or heaven descends to us, either way, we are participating in the divine nature. It's like the angels ascending and descending on Jacob's ladder.

[Genesis 28:12] Wherever we are on that ladder, here at the bottom rung or way up there at the top, as long as we are climbing it, we are in the process of falling upward, we are ascending into the precincts of heaven, participating in the divine nature, enjoying communion with God.

Now when we look up that ladder, we can see our foremothers and fathers in the faith, and in a few years, we're going to get a regular reminder from one of them to climb a little higher. By 2020, one of those mothers is going to grace the \$20 bill.

Harriet Tubman was a true mother of freedom. When she was 27, she escaped her enslaved self, which was a false self, and found her true God-given identity in helping others take a further journey into freedom. Tubman was a rare soul who managed to live the second half of her life for most of her life. She danced the sacred dance, participated in the divine nature, not by holding out for a heaven in the sky but by doing everything she could to bring heaven down to earth. Whether it was fighting slavery or promoting women's suffrage or working through the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church to open a home for the elderly and the indigent, she was doing what her Savior came to do. She was bringing good news to the poor,

release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. [Luke 4:18]

On Mother's Day, this mother acknowledges that we can't all be Harriet Tubman. But with God's grace, we can strive to fall upwards with Jesus and look forward to the day—why not today?—when we are set free to live in a land of promise where you can be you and I can be me at one with God. Blessed be.