

WGUMC June 2, 2019 Acts 1:1-11 “Defying Gravity”

“Why do you stand there looking up?” That’s what the men in white robes ask the disciples as they watch Jesus recede into a cloud. And I wonder that myself. Why do we always look up, expecting God to be up there somewhere?

I suppose that’s why I love the Rockies. Too bad I couldn’t see them on the plane ride to Denver last week. Clouds all the way. Still cloudy the next day, we got in the car to drive to Nebraska. Now, if you’ve never been there, eastern Colorado is as flat as the Rockies are high. As we drove by endless fields, the tallest thing in sight was a windmill or a telephone pole or the occasional grain elevator. Ironically, I had given Roxanne the sermon title: “Defying Gravity.” But the truth is that I left feeling tired and wondering if gravity wasn’t going to get the best of me. Looking at all that flat land, I was longing for some Ascension.

This is Ascension Sunday, the day we mark the last of Jesus’ resurrection appearances. On this day, we celebrate the ascent of

Jesus into heaven and look forward to the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost. So while we are standing there looking up, I have to point out that it's just as important for us to get down. Because what the Bible promises and the life of Christ proves is that there is never an ascent without a corresponding descent.

The old Blood, Sweat and Tears song says, "What goes up must come down." That is true not just in physics, but also in faith. The white robes say, "This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." What goes up will come down. So gravity is built into our spirituality.

The cycle of ascending and descending is not just the theme of this story. It is the theme of God's story. It is the pattern of God's interactions with the Creation. The life of Christ follows this pattern, too, and it is captured in an early Christian hit song included in Paul's letter to the Philippians. First, Christ came down, emptying himself of his God-ness, humbling himself down into human likeness, taking on the form of a servant, becoming obedient to the point of death,

even death on a cross. [Philippians 2:6-8] Then, in reward for that obedience, Christ was lifted up. “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God...” [2:9] Can’t you just hear the praise band playing?

So “why do you stand there looking up?” when Christ shows us in his own life that to obey God, to live out the truth and the purpose of God, we have to go down, get real, get grounded. We can’t be lifted up until we’ve been brought low. We can’t be exalted without first being humbled. Following Jesus means following this same pattern.

Jesus is in Bethany when he challenges his disciples to go down. Bethany is a town on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem. When he tells the disciples to wait in the city, they have to descend the mountain to get there. Spiritually, they have to

go back down to the scene of the crime, the crucifixion. It's a place of supreme vulnerability, but it is there and not on the mountain in Bethany, where they will receive power from the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

Jesus' directions to the disciples give direction to our discipleship. We also have to go down and wait in our own Jerusalem, wherever that is, whatever that is. For when have we ever made any real progress or received any spiritual power without getting down and making ourselves vulnerable?

That can happen in a support group where you deal with the grief that's not going away. Or in therapy to heal some wounds that have been festering for too long. Or in talking to a spouse about what is really wrong with your relationship or in keeping a journal to find out what is really going on with your life or in going to the doctor to get those tests to discover what is really happening with your health. Or it could happen when you get in the car to drive to Nebraska.

I flew to Colorado so that I could do the bulk of the driving for my parents as they made their annual Memorial Day trek back to put flowers on family graves. However, my almost 89-year-old dad insisted on driving the first couple of hours. Well, we didn't get even an hour out of Loveland when we arrived in a little town called Ault and a pickup truck pulled out from a stop sign and ran into our car. We were all ok. It was the other guy's fault and he was very apologetic. The policeman was right there. The guy's insurance agent was just down the street and came and inspected our car. All in all, it couldn't have turned out any better. We had to hang around for several hours before we could secure a rental car, but then we were on our way.

Across the miles and miles of miles and miles, I couldn't help but wonder if this were the last long car trip I would ever take with my parents. Would this be the last time I drove these roads, visited these cemeteries, heard these old stories? Later, as we put irises and lilacs on graves, I realized that my parents are older now than

my grandparents were when they died and that suddenly made me feel very vulnerable. Someday my sibs and I were going to be alone. So this is what it feels like to go back to Jerusalem and wait.

I felt myself descending into these thoughts not because I wanted to but something compelled me to. It made me sad, but at the same time, I was also glad for the chance to relive those memories and remake those connections to family. I could do this better down here on the flatlands of Nebraska rather than in the mountains of Colorado. So, there I was in my Jerusalem, waiting for the power of the Holy Spirit to come down and lift me back up.

Summer is a good time to do this kind of soul work. The kids are out of school. Things tend to slow down on the job. You can make time for those spiritual projects that have been backing up. Some of you will try to do that on your travels, but you don't have to leave town. The Holy Spirit travels and will come to you.

This summer, you can join a book group. Richard Rohr has a new book out called, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality*

*Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe.* I'd like to read it. How about you? You can meet Ingrid for meditation on Mondays or Yin Mei and me for Kaleidoscope Bible Study on Fridays. You can build houses in Mexico or volunteer at Village House right here. Anything that will ground you and ready you to receive the Holy Spirit. You can even come to church as long as you are coming not to escape your problems but to face them.

My folks and I went to church with my uncle on Saturday night. Trinity UMC in Grand Island is my mom's home church. When they built the new sanctuary in 1957, my parents were the first to be married there. As the preacher was talking about the prevenient grace of God, the grace that comes to you even when you're not ready for it, blesses you even when you don't know it, I was thinking about the grace that grabbed me on this memory trip when I started out feeling so tired and weighed down by work and worries and the state of the world. As the organ played, I looked at the brick and stone and stained glass and thought about my mother and father,

and their mothers and fathers, and all that wonderful cloud of witnesses whose faith, hope and love lives on and keeps lifting us up.

But it was when the service was over and we were driving around downtown that I saw the sign. Flying cars! Defying gravity! Silicon Valley may have self-driving cars, but we don't have flying cars. I had to drive to Nebraska to see them. Just like we sometimes have to go to graveyards and grapple with dead certainties so we can reclaim life while waiting for God's awesome possibilities. Making cars fly is nothing compared to making Jesus rise. What God did for Jesus God can do for us.

Pentecost is always a possibility for us. Don't miss it. Go where you have to go, do what you have to do this summer to experience it. If the gravity of your situation is weighing you down, just wait. The great universal pattern of Creation still holds and your salvation story is still being told. Not many days from now, God's Spirit will come down and you will be lifted up.