

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH
Sunday May 24, 2020 ~ 7th Sunday of Easter

“FALLING UP” by Shel Silverstein

I tripped on my shoelace
And I fell up—
Up to the roof tops,
Up over town,
Up past the tree tops,
Up over the mountains,
Up where the colors
Blend into the sounds.
But it got me so dizzy
When I looked around,
I got sick to my stomach
And I threw down.

Reading: Acts 1:3-14

After his suffering Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 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.”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Sermon: “Falling Up”

The resurrected Jesus, the Christ, after 40 days on earth comforting and instructing his followers on final things, is taken up into heaven.

Christ’s Ascension is the subject of countless glorious renaissance paintings. If you look up into the cupola of a baroque cathedral, for example, the chances are very high that there will be a tromp l’oeil painting of swirling clouds, surrounded by angels, a brilliant ray of sunlight breaking

through these clouds, white doves fluttering, and the Christ, carried up, victorious, ready to take his place on the mercy seat of heaven.

Like these glorious renaissance paintings, this moment of Christ's triumph is something we want to celebrate. Like the disciples who witness this event, we want to gaze towards heaven and marvel, see Christ lifted up, until the last moment when that cloud takes him out of sight. Finally, after all he has been through – the man we love is getting the break he deserves. It's about time we say to ourselves. Alleluia.

In the early church, Ascension Day was one of the major feast days. It was cause for serious celebration, as the final sign of Christ's majesty, and the assurance of his triumph and glory. In our hymns today, you will hear much of this language. Indeed, The Ascension – like the Annunciation, the Birth of Jesus, his baptism, and his Transfiguration – all point to Christ's glory, which is indeed, a cause for celebration. These celebratory moments in Christ's life are at the heart of what Luther called the Theology of Glory – Christ's triumph over the power of evil and of death – which is so close to, and yet, juxtaposed with the Theology of the Cross – our understanding of Christ's humiliation and death.

After so much of the Cross, and perhaps, so much of the crosses we ourselves are bearing during this difficult time, we, like the disciples, want to look to the clouds and the sky and the brilliant sunlight this Ascension Sunday, because we want to see, to quote a popular song, “love lifted back to where it belongs, where the eagles cry, on a mountain high. Far from the world below, up where the clear winds blow.”

We want the happy ending. We want Christ to finally be where he belongs, and where he deserves to be. We want him to finally escape, and to establish himself in the place where we hope we can ascend ourselves when we shuck this mortal coil, and escape ourselves.

I hear this understanding sometimes at people's deathbeds, when family members try to give permission to their loved ones to let go, and be with Jesus. To go to heaven, where Jesus is, and to leave this place, where Jesus so clearly is not. To rise up, like Jesus after a difficult life well-lived and take their place at his side. Here at Fonthill United, for example, we have a stain-glass window which iterates this theological viewpoint. It shows a brilliant sunset, with Jesus standing near. The words above say: “Beyond the sunset, we shall see His face.”

And yet, if we do this, if we think about “up” and “Heaven” all the time, I think we might actually fall down on what is really happening, and miss the whole point. In fact, our scripture suggests that this falling down may, in fact, be happening to the disciples on that first Ascension Day. Angels, it appears, are needed to pick up the disciples, and ensure that they fall up, to a more complete understanding of the Ascension. Two men in white robes appeared and stood by them. They said to Christ's followers, “Why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Christ, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

I hate it when the guys in white appear to us in scripture and, rather than make everything clear, utter cryptic words which confound our understanding. For much of this week, I tried to understand the words of the men in white by trying to understand why it was bad to look to the sky, if Christ was, in fact, going to come back, by a kind of reverse Ascension. After all, if Christ is going to descend from Heaven again, it seems natural that we should be looking up. But the angels clearly don't want us to do this.

I got very caught up in this problem this week. I wanted to clarify it for you. I wanted to make the angels' words lucid and sensible. But only when I shifted my focus to the beginning of the angels' words, did I start to understand. "Why do we stand looking towards the heavens?"

In other words, as we carry our own crosses, as we wait, as we struggle with this mortal coil, why are we looking towards the heavens? Do we understand that too much fixation upwards can, in the end, trip us down? Can we see how such a fixation might lead us to thinking that miracles can only come to us from above? That the only good that exists is to be found in heaven? That this type of thinking can lead us to an unhelpful 'heaven is good, and the earth bad' understanding creeping into our sense of Christ's triumphant ascension? Can this fixation on heaven perhaps blind us to the central truth of the ascension that Christ is king of not just heaven but of earth?

This is, I believe, what the angels are telling us. Christ is coming back. Christ's saving action will continue here on earth. Christ will descend. And that it is here on earth that salvation and healing, and hope and peace and love will be established. That the Ascension is temporary. That if we place all our hope in heaven above, Christ's upward ascension and triumph will collapse.

Our scripture is full of movement. Rapid falls. Startling ascents. Moves sideways. Trips by sea, foot and donkey. Exoduses. Seas that part. Doves descending. Mountaintop experiences. Upper rooms. Valleys of the shadow of death. Sermons on the mount. And sermons on the plain.

In scripture, God's people trip on their shoelaces all the time and fall up:

Up to the roof tops, up over town, up past the tree tops, up over the mountains, up where the colors blend into the sounds. But like the tower Babel, we can only go so high. We get dizzy. When we look around, we get sick to our stomach, and God throws us down. Because, it is here on earth, that we belong.

I think in our scripture today that the angels are throwing us down, so we can fall up. Christ in our scripture tells the disciples in our reading for today, in his very last words to them, that "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth." In his final words, Christ reminds us that the whole point of the coming of the Holy Spirit and our works as witnesses of the Good News is for the restoration of the Promised Land, the new Eden, the land of milk and honey, here on earth. In our scripture, he reminds his disciples then, and us today, that on Earth, as it is in heaven, is the goal.

"Why are we looking to the skies?" ask the angels.

Because it feels good. Because we need a rest. Because sometimes looking squarely at the Earth is hard, especially now. Because we need sometimes to place our hope elsewhere and recharge. Certainly.

But if we look to the skies too fixedly, we risk missing the point. There is a whole wide world out there, that Christ is asking us to help save. If Christ is truly to have the victory, then it is to the earth, where Christ will return, that we need to fix our attention, in spite of the disease, the fear and the uncertainty.

Jesus will reign. Jesus will reign over heaven and earth. Alleluia.