

From the Pulpit

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“Ascending Spirit!”

***Acts 1:1-11; I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11, Luke
24:44-53***

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A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 7, The First Sunday after Ascension, June 1, 2014, dedicated to all the seniors graduating in the class of 2014, to the memory of Wanda Jean May Ray who for 84 years was a member of our congregation and now has ascended to heaven and always to the glory of God!

“Ascending Spirit!”

Acts 1:1-11; I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11, Luke 24:44-53

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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As a new day dawned on our nation this Sunday morning, once again light was shed on the divisions among the American people. While I am not talking about politics reflecting the broken nature of Congress, I could be. Rather, every Sunday morning in America, a great division takes place as some people go to church and most stay home. Those not going to church aren't taking a week off; church is sadly and simply not a part of their lives. In 21st Century America, this growing divide is a reflection of a growing religious diversification - which may ultimately mean fewer Christians, and more and more Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, other religious believers and “Nones” – not “N-u-n-s” but N-o-n-e-s – people who claim to be spiritual but not religious (another sermon...).

What we are witnessing is more than religious diversity. For a growing number of “post-Christians” - houses of worship are little more than antiques, museums perhaps (an annex of CMA?) fussed over by wishful thinkers who do not know when to admit they are wrong and go home.

Think about it. From the stay-at-home viewpoint what we do must look like one of the most peculiar things 21st Century human beings can do - come together week after week with no intention of being productive (we call it “Sabbath” rest). Rather, they see us as joining in full voice to declare things they cannot prove about a God they cannot see are true. (Barbara Brown Taylor, Gospel Medicine, Cowley Publications, Boston, MA., 1995, p. 72).

Is it any wonder that those who stay home think us odd, or worse, look down on us and speak of us in pejorative terms? Who can blame them? In fact, there is a constant temptation to “be them” - because we know what Sunday looks like from their perspective! We've been there. We've done that. We know

them – some of them are our family members – some of them are us. Most (if not all) of us know the ebb and flow of the Sunday rituals as we view it from the home front. We know how good it can feel to sit in our favorite chair at home on a Sunday morning curled-up with the NY Times, a good book and a cup of coffee.

But we come.

And what we do here is worship God. We choose to worship in the Trinitarian manifestation of Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit – although I believe we all understand God’s Trinitarian manifestation in vastly different ways (another sermon).

However we name and claim this worship experience, whatever we do and say here, it is what we do over and over again. In so doing, we find our place in the universe - living between past and future, between pain and healing, between our faith and fears, between earth and heaven. This is how and where we learn who we are and what we are supposed to be doing.

Worship brings us together in silence and in sung and spoken word, in bread and wine, under banners and stained-glass in the embrace of Christ's peace and the tears of unknowing. We peer into the darkness together, hold on to each other and ask questions. Some of the questions seem constantly and consistently unresolved. Some of the questions find their illuminating answers in Holy Scripture. But, we keep coming and just like the creation of the universe itself, from the words of Genesis, we echo God's reflective love, "It is good!"

We may continue to baffle our neighbors, the “Nones” of our life and our unbelieving friends who wonder why we do what we do especially when some leaders and people in the church draw attention to the church by acting like the antithesis of Christ in completely inappropriate ways.

But if we baffle our friends and neighbors, we must admit that often we baffle ourselves, proclaiming good news when the news is so bad, trusting the light when the sky is filled with darkness, continuing to wait on a savior in our midst when all the evidence suggests that he was lifted up and carried into heaven a long time ago....which brings us to our texts today – from Luke and Acts. (Drawn from Ibid, pp. 72-73).

In Luke 24:44-53 and again in Acts 1:1-11, we are told of the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven which takes place 40 days after Easter. This Ascension story is how the Gospel of Luke ends and the Book of Acts begins. Since both were written by the same author (St. Luke), he clearly saw this story as the lynchpin between earth and heaven, between the Risen Christ and the Still Rising One, between the time of Jesus and the time of his followers called “Christians.”

On the Mount of Olives (the same place Jesus was praying when arrested and carried away to crucifixion), the Risen Christ rises one last time. With his disciples watching, he offers a final blessing, and is transformed and transported to heaven. While you and I find ourselves relating to Jesus as newborn, as a young boy in the temple, as carpenter, fisherman, teacher, prophet, healer, and all his human dimensions, most of us, if not all of us, struggle to relate to Jesus rising unto heaven and sitting at the right hand of God.

Although we as 21st Century Christians are not quite sure of the Razzle Dazzle of the Ascension, apparently our forbearers in faith here thought well of Christ Ascending into Heaven. The highest point of the Jeffrey Window in the chancel is the ascension of Christ into heaven. Our new church directory highlights the window. He is relaxed and seated on a rainbow of hope in uncertain times – placed there in the heart of the American Depression. He appears perfect, almost translucent in his transcendence.

The men and women who built First Church believed that remembering and visualizing his transformation on high would lift our spirits. They were right. Because when our eyes are lifted up and watching God, when our vision is lifted heavenward, we cannot be sad. We physically and emotionally cannot get down when we are looking up! It is a physiological truth. Try it sometime. Look up and stay sad – you can't do it.

But, we still feel a little empty looking at him rising. We prefer to have him return. We prefer his presence to his absence. We prefer to be his disciple, following him around in the flesh; rather than to be his witnesses, having to tell others all about him and living his way. It's easier to follow him around than to lead in his name.

But, what we prefer isn't God's plan. God's plan is that we are to be fueled and fed by the Holy Spirit. We are to be guided and led by the testimonies of faith from the first church and empowered for faith and action by the tests we faced in our own times. **God's plan was to take Jesus away** so that instead of looking up to heaven and standing in awe of him, our eyes would come and settle upon the horizon of life and see the needs of those around us - the ones for whom we are to care and tend.

One of my favorite apocryphal stories comes from the day of Ascension - but it comes from the view of heaven. As Jesus entered the gates of heaven and headed for his place at the right hand of God, he was stopped by the littlest angel who had been watching from on high what had been happening down below. The littlest angel asked Jesus, "Who are those people looking up to heaven?" Jesus answered, "They are my disciples." To which the angel continued, "What are they going to do now that you are up here?" Jesus answered, "They will carry my

message to the far corners of the earth." Looking down and scratching his head, the angel asked, "Don't you have another plan if that doesn't work?" Kneeling down and smiling, Jesus replied, "No, little one. **They are my only plan.** If they can't carry my word forward to others, no one can." The littlest angel continued scratching his head and musing, "Well, if that's your only plan, I hope it works." Jesus said, "It will work."

With nothing but a promise and prayer, the eleven abandoned disciples, took the mantle of Jesus Christ and carried it to a world hungering and thirsting for his word and way. The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the converts became missionaries, and the healed became healers. The disciples became apostles and witnesses of the Risen Christ and by the promised power of the Holy Spirit they carried the message to the far corners of the world and nothing was ever the same again (*Ibid*, p. 77). Now it would have been easier if Jesus had stayed with them and made things happen for them, but the Gospel might never have made it out of First Century Palestine if God had chosen that plan. It certainly wouldn't have made it all the way to Columbus Ohio and our First Church if it wasn't God's Plan.

There was no other plan and those who were transformed in living it out were never the same again.

This Ascension Day plan has been passed down through the ages to us. The Ascending Spirit is right here. Right now. As we take our eyes from the vision of the ascending Christ, may we do as the disciples, drop our eyes from the heights to the horizon, see each other clearly and get on with the business of the church - which is unifying, healing, teaching, speaking and living the Word of God, opening our arms and our hearts to all people, standing up and speaking out for justice and peace, and glorifying and worshiping God in all that we do. And then, we will find, through speaking and living God's word, those who are not coming will come. After all, if we don't do it, who will?

For we are our Risen and Now Ascended Lord's Only Plan. His Ascending Spirit is left behind in us. He believes in us. Now, I pray this day that we believe in ourselves and trust God's ascending spirit alive and well in our souls. Amen.

