

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 12, 2013, Easter 7, dedicated to Ardis Postle, who was a great mother and passed away May 3rd just 12 days before she was celebrated her 100th birthday, my “Mother’s Day” mom on her 85th birthday, to my wife, who is an amazing mom to my children, to Candace Cain, Frankie Keller and Sarah Roberts, our 2013 Schumacher Award winners, to all the women of First Church, and always to the glory of God!

“Getting Carried Away”*

Acts 1:1-11; 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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Some of you may not have been paying close attention last Thursday as 40th day of the Easter season came and went. It was the Feast of the Ascension of our Lord. For those of us who were not raised in a highly liturgical tradition, the celebration of Ascension Day gets lost most years.

United Methodist Bishop William Willimon tells a story of one of his colleagues at Duke University, Ed Cogert. Unlike Bill, Father Ed comes from an Episcopal tradition that dresses up in full regalia and complete with “smells and bells” commemorates the mystery of Christ ascending on the 40th day of Easter.

One year, with the whole seminary in robes and gathered in the chapel, Fr. Cogert remembers the celebration ending with clouds of incense ascending and a great song of ascension leading

them out of the mist into the courtyard. What the worshipers did not know was that one enterprising student had taken one of the tacky, life-size Christmas crèche figures (you know, the hollow, light-weight plastic ones) and he had attached a rocket device to it. As the proper and distinguished clergy entered the courtyard, the young man (probably a misplaced UCC student), lit the fuse and sent the rocket and the plastic shepherd out of the shrubbery and into space through a cloud of smoke and sparks. It shot right through the procession and ended up on a dormitory roof nearby. There the Ascension Day Rocket sputtered and died.

Needless to say, the dean of the seminary did not give the student extra credit for his Ascension Day pyrotechnic display. When the student defended himself by saying, "*I was merely trying to dramatize my deep belief in the reality of the ascension of Christ,*" the dean was not moved or amused. In addition, this act did not catch-on among Episcopalian liturgical innovators, dramatizing the established gap that still exists to this day between rocket science and Ascension celebrations (drawn from William Willimon, *On a Wild and Windy Mountain*, Abington Press, Nashville, TN., 1984, p. 100).

I think there are still Christians who would rather take a pass on the Ascension of our Lord and leave it to our good liturgical brothers and sisters who enjoy Thursday celebrations on the 40th day of Easter each year. The rocket "Son of Man" being raised into the clouds doesn't really fit our flattened, one-dimensional, "advanced" views of the universe. Jesus with his feet on the ground and only his arms in the air fits our worldview much better. Jesus as "Superman" or "Ironman" rocketing into the clouds doesn't really fit – especially in the flatlands of Ohio and our Midwestern sensibility.

We dismiss the Ascension because it comes out of an alien cosmology. But dismissing the Ascension because of our modern cosmology and our scientific depths of understanding is as ignorant as dismissing Genesis 1 and 2 because our advanced understanding of creation and evolution. The ascension of our Lord is about

eternal truth, not the physical evidence we have or need for scientific truth.

All the church really wanted to say about the ascension of Christ is best expressed by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians:

“Although he was in the form of God . . . Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of humanity . . . Therefore God has lifted him up, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God, the Father.”
(Phil. 2:6-11)

This fits well into what John Calvin said of the Ascension, *“It is not a story about a place, but a function . . . and that function is the Lordship of Christ.”*

In other words, there is something cosmic about our Savior, something grand that reaches beyond the stars, something that takes him out of a carpenter’s workshop, a fisherman’s boat, a rabbi’s synagogue. There is something extra-special about our crucified and risen Lord. He is and will be forevermore at the right-hand of God. In Matthew’s words in 28:11, *“He rules with the Creator and all power is given unto him.”*

God has gone up! *“Deus Ascendit.”*

As we sing the songs of ascension many of us are inwardly crying, *“Don’t be carried away. We need you here on earth!”* We don’t need you to be “Rocket Man.” We need you to be “Feeding Man,” “Holding Man,” “Healing Man,” “Teaching Man,” “Compassion Man.”

I suggest to you that our problem with understanding the Ascension might just be that we have stopped asking the great cosmic questions about our cosmic God and our cosmic Christ. Let’s consider that the Ascension is the great answer for eternal

AND ever-present questions about war, injustice, oppression and faith. Because God has gone up into the clouds, we are compelled to deal with cosmic, global, universal concerns. (*Ibid*, p. 104). Remember, in these days in May almost 2,000 years ago, the first disciples who feared that he was leaving them were assured that he was going, *not away*, but **UP!** (John 20:19). If you can't tell the difference between "going away" and "up," may I recommend you see the movie *Up* – that will explain everything you need to know.

One of my favorite apocryphal stories is an Ascension Day story. When Jesus ascended to heaven he was met by the Littlest Angel. The littlest angel had been rolling around in the clouds and stopped playing when Jesus arrived. He looked at his Lord and he looked down on the mountain where longing disciples were looking up and looking forlorn. He asked Jesus, "So, what happens next?" Jesus said, "What do you mean?" The Littlest Angel tried again, "Now that you are up here, what will they do? What is your plan?" Jesus pointed to the disciples and said, "They are my plan." The Littlest Angel laughed and laughed and then looking at Jesus smiling at him realized Jesus was serious. The angel asked, "Don't you have any other plan?" "No," Jesus replied. "They are my only plan."

We are called to be "Carried Away for Christ." We are called to be our Ascending Lord's plan on earth. We are the only plan he has. If we fail, the whole project called "the Jesus Movement" fails with us. There are needs for our sacred earth and all the inhabitants of earth all around us.

Let's trust that our Ascended Lord is above us and beyond us, but is also within us and around us - close at hand. He needs us to get our heads out of the clouds and focus on the earth and its creatures, which he has left to our care. He doesn't need us shooting up rockets inside of plastic shepherds. He needs us to really be his plan on earth. After all, we are his **ONLY** plan. Amen.

* Thanks goes to Bishop William Willimon for his story found in his book, *On a Wild and Windy Mountain*, and other insights on the Ascension of our Lord shared in that section (pp. 100-107).

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