

“Up!”

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 7, May 12, 2024, dedicated to the “mothers” in my life – Lorene K. Ahrens, my mom who turns 96 tomorrow, Susan E. Sitler, the Mother of my 4 children, Kirs, Thalia, Sarah and Destiny, the mothers of my seven and soon to be nine grandchildren and on this Mother’s Day 2024, to all the mothers of First Church, To Leslie Blanchard and the Schumacher Foundation for their generosity and kindness, to Amy Wagner and the Schumacher Awards committee for all their heartfelt efforts, and to our FANTASTIC FIVE 2024 Schumacher Award recipients, LaNiya Chatman, Alyssa Hofacker, Alvina Kissi, Kaylie McCarthy, and Macie Wollenberg and to each of their mothers and families and always to the glory of God!

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

Amen.

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Our scriptural texts in Luke 24 and Acts 1 unite to lift us UP this morning. As you know, Luke was the author of both texts – closing his Gospel as Jesus Ascends to Heaven and then opening his magnificent story of the early church with the same story told slightly differently. Before rising into heaven he leaves them with a blessing and the Power of the Holy Spirit to carry on God’s work and mission on earth. His Rising gives was to their rising, too. In

this beautiful and simple handing over of his mission vision, Jesus embodies this simple truth: “If you want to help yourself up, lift somebody else up.” I will return to this soon...

It was said of the great preacher and teacher, mystic justice witness, The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman that one time in Boston University’s Marsh Chapel that he began a sermon just like this....looking up....into the high reaches of the chapel. After Dr. Thurman had gazed long into the highest place in the chapel, he lowered his eyes and asked everyone around – looking up with him – “*What are your eyes beholding as you look up?*” All were naturally wondering the same of Dr. Thurman who had begun the upward search. They were all looking up. They were all being changed by the power of God’s Spirit alive in Marsh Chapel that day.

“Up!” There is something beautiful and good about looking UP. We feel it when we do it. When our eyes are drawn to the high branches of trees, to the skies, to the heavens, we are taken away by the grandeur above us. As Abraham Lincoln put it, “ I can see how a person could look down at the earth and claim to be an atheist, but there is no way a person can look to the heavens and not believe in God.”

There are wonderful moments in our lives when our eyes are drawn **UP together**. Our eyes unite in upward gaze at Fireworks each Fourth of July weekend. Some of us seek more upward lift by going to Red, White and Boom and our local fireworks, too!

Some of us saw the Northern Lights in the last few nights as we were drawn to the colorful display lighting up the northern skies brought on by the Coronal Mass Ejections (or CMEs) blasting from the surface of the sun. A huge geomagnetic solar storm slamming into the earth is worthy of watching out in the high skies above. Note – this one may also cause power outages.

And on a beautiful Spring afternoon – Monday, April 8th, all our Ohio eyes were looking directly at the sun (with intense shades!) as the moon aligned

with the sun in a total solar eclipse at 3:08pm. It was beautiful. We were all over the country watching! Call out the location where you saw the Total Solar Eclipse on April 8th. It was spectacular!

Up! It is not only beautiful, unifying and spectacular to look up at Fireworks, Northern Lights and Total Solar Eclipses it actually brings us peace. While at least 95% of our time is spend looking down or straight ahead, it is when we look UP that we connect to the Stars, to the Universe, to the Divine, to meditative states, to mystic and spiritual experiences. One of the gifts of a massive cathedral, like ours is that by looking up, in the words of Zora Neale Hurston, “Our Eyes are Watching God.” In fact, a recent initiative from the American Institute of Architects urged all of us to look up more. The motivation for the campaign was to encourage people to pay attention to the awe-inspiring vistas of human creations that surround us – here and everywhere.

So, let’s support the American Institute of Architects this Mother’s Day and Look Up! Look up! What do you see? Do you see Jesus Ascending on the rainbow in the Jeffrey Window? Or the window attributing to Mary and her Mother, Anna? Do you see the Days of Creation windows in the center of the sanctuary – or Friendship to the East or Gladden to the West or the Rose window to the south (behind the Beckerath Organ in the Gallery)? Look up! Do you see the Four Angels Holding up the Archways of our church?

When we do this, we put ourselves into connection with the lofty infinite and we contemplate and embrace our place in God’s Universe. Looking up in this room, in this church or in general, will affect your mood and your patterns of thought – and your faith in God and one another.

I was looking up this weekend when I had to pause for a little while and look down. And know what I saw? I saw the faces and stories of the five young women we are honoring this morning with the 2024 Schumacher Awards. I saw LaNiya Chatman, Alyssa Hofacker, Alvina Kissi, Kaylie McCarthy, and Macie Wollenberg. I saw five young women whose eyes are watching God. I

saw five young women who look up, especially in the midst of being down. And as I read about their amazing witnesses of love for their families and others, the words I spoke earlier came to life before my eyes. **“If you want to help yourself up, lift somebody else up.”**

Embodied in these young women and their life stories are the words of a beloved friend and Black Baptist preacher from Birmingham, Alabama, the late-Bishop Abraham Lincoln Woods. His words came to life in their witnesses: “Don’t be so heavenly minded you are no earthly good.” LaNiya, have you ever heard Bishop Ware say this? If not, take it back and share it with him! “Don’t be so heavenly minded you are no earthly good.”

Each one of you is both – heavenly minded and earthly good! I love that!

Jesus could have easily said this on the Mount of Ascension in Bethany as he was rising to be on His Father’s Right Hand on the Throne of Glory. His way of saying it was like this: “You are my witnesses. Take my Good News to the ends of the earth.”

All five of you are abiding witnesses of God’s love.

LaNiya, you have given yourself in love to your whole family while your mother has battled cancer. You have given extra loving care to your younger brothers and sisters allowing your father to stay especially focused on your mother. You have been amazing and faithful – all at the same time. LaNiya, thank you and God bless you for lifting up others and shining Christ’s light.

Alyssa, your love for Luke (who was named after our Gospel writer today) has been done because you love him. But in the words of your school counselor, Courtney, your “unwavering Christian spirit shines brightly through her daily actions and it is truly inspiring.” You spread your love to others through your work with others who live with disabilities at the Licking County YMCA. You are a beacon of light. Alyssa, thank you for lifting up Luke and others and shining Christ’s light.

Alvina, your commitment is rooted in your deep Christian faith. It is made manifest in the dedicated love and care you show to your father and brother. You give yourself to them and it doesn't stop there. You shine your light at school through the Zuvaa Afro-Caribbean Dancers, The Fort Hayes Career Center Surgical Support and more. Alvina, thank you for lifting up your father and brother and others and shining Christ's light.

Kaylie today must be tough. It must be bittersweet. It is Mother's Day – without your mother – who lost her battle with breast cancer three years ago. And shortly after her death, your grandfather's stroke and your grandmother's being partial paralyzed following epileptic seizures. In the midst of your own grief, you stepped up bigtime when things were looking down for your family. You learned to drive – as soon as possible – so you could help with your sisters and the needs your father was facing. You must be a really good driver. You were taking your sisters to their practices, games and more, and getting your grandmother to her doctor's appointments – while cooking all the meals at home. You are a beacon of strength and light to all those around you. Kaylie, thank you for lifting up your sisters, your father, your grandparents and shining Christ's light.

Macie, you cared for your Aunt Jill and your Nana with such love and devotion, and did all of that while battling the greatest challenge of all – a curveball on the outside corner (sorry – I love softball too, Macie!). As your Aunt Jill battled mental illness, your grandmother Nana was battling Stage 4 brain cancer. You cared for each of them and both of them. You were present with Nana when she joined Jesus in Heaven. In the words of Lynette Emmert, your Guidance/Athletic Secretary at Libert Union High School, you showed “love, compassion, empathy and reassurance to your family that everything will be okay, and you will see them again.” In the words of Jesus, “We will see each other again, and our hearts will rejoice, and no one can take our joy from us!” Macie, thank you for lifting up your Aunt and your Nana and shining Christ's light.

We would all be wise to listen to and live into these words: **“If you want to help yourself up, lift somebody else up.”** These are words to live by. If we live by these words, then we will never look down on anyone, unless we are looking down to lift them up.

My friends, **Look Up!** See the Ascending Christ smiling on your life. Look up and see the beautiful light of God coming down to greet you. Look up and see, the gifts of eternity extending from earth to heaven and heaven to earth. Look up when you are down and see the hand of a family member, a friend, a neighbor, a stranger – extending her hand, or his hand to lift you up.

Never stop looking up! Amen.