

# What Goes Up and What Comes Down

The Rev. Andrew Van Kirk

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St. Andrew's Westridge

Drew, our soon to be two year-old, is beginning to rapidly acquire new words but is not yet at the stage where he can be counted upon to use them. Just this week, he went into the bathroom, took the toothpaste off the counter, held it above his head like a trophy, and exclaimed, "too-aste!" But when I asked him a minute later to say toothpaste, he just looked at me with furrowed brow.

The one thing he can be counted on to say regularly is "bearplane," which is long for "airplane." If there is an airplane visible in the sky, Drew will usually search it out, point, and declare "bearplane." Should you fail to acknowledge this monumental discovery, the word "bearplane" will be repeated until you do so.

Of course, in his fascination with airplanes, Drew is not unique. Even if I think my toddler is the cutest, most toddlers love airplanes. Already at the age of one, we realize there's something special about things rising up in the sky. We earthen, earthbound creatures know — before any of our complex intellectual faculties take shape — that when things go up in the sky, we need to pay attention. What's up is what's special.

I am sure that if Drew and I had been around to witness the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven, he would have pointed a finger at the ascending Jesus, turned to me and said, "Bearplane!"

There a couple of things about the story of the Ascension that make it challenging. Here's one of them. As Jesus rose, above the earth towards the cloud, we know the surrounding air would gradually have gotten thinner and colder. Perhaps the cloud was low though, and he had dressed warmly. But he's on his way to heaven; he's headed to the top, right? So he keeps going. At 30,000 - 35,000 feet or so, around the top of Mount Everest or a cruising "bear plane", the external temperature (without taking into account wind chill) would have been -65 degrees of so. As he moved out of the troposphere and up into the stratosphere (like a divine weather balloon), it would actually get warmer — though with hardly any air; luckily he had that resurrection body. At 11-25 miles or so, he'd have gotten to what we call "near space." From there, provided he didn't get hit by any meteors on the way up, the next stop would be the Karman Line, about 62 miles high — the edge of outer space and the area of the atmosphere that lights up with the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights. Keep ascending, and from about 100-1000 miles up, he'd be in the region

where the Space Shuttle, ISS, and Hubble Orbit. From there it's a real big jump to the orbits of the GPS satellites, at 12,550 miles. At 22,236 miles the ascending Jesus would finally reach geostationary orbit. 22,236 miles, and the ascending Jesus — like the first century astronaut — still hadn't made it to heaven.

We know a little more today about what is up than Luke, or any of the disciples standing there, did. This is, as one commentator put it, “a pre-Copernican story,” by which he and many others essentially mean it couldn't have happened, we know better.

To which I say, “Hogwash!” The Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon puts the proper response to this clearly: “Of course heaven isn't up. But if you are going to act out a cosmically significant departure, you have — even in the twenty-first century — a choice of only three directions: up, down, or sideways. Of those, only *up* has the parabolic significance you are after. *Down* implies the opposite of what you want to symbolize, and *sideways* might make people think only that you had moved to Grand Rapids.”

Up is the way to go. Up is the direction incense goes; it's the direction we send our prayers. Up where the airplanes are. Even toddlers know that what is up is special.

And besides, the ascending Jesus only has to make it to the cloud, just get out of sight. At that point he can exit stage left and head on over to heaven, in whatever direction that is.

The story of the ascension is not about the location where heaven is; it's not really even about where Jesus currently is. It's about the location where Jesus isn't. He isn't here. He isn't on earth anymore. Be not sad! This is a glorious truth about our post-Easter faith — Jesus isn't here.

The Ascension marks a change in the way God is present with us. The title of this sermon was a question, “What Goes Up and What Comes Down?” The short answer is easy. Just repeat after me: Jesus goes up, the Holy Spirit comes down.

If you haven't already, take out this passage and let's look at it together — just so we can be clear about how it all works. Our reading opens with verse 6, when the disciples ask Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” To which Jesus replies, “Ughh. For real? Y'all are still asking that question?” Or something like that. Then in verse 8, “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.”

So there is the promise of the Holy Spirit, and that promise is tied to the job Jesus has given them to spread the good news, to witness, to the ends of the earth. Then,

in verse 8, he ascends. He gets out of the way, to make room for the Holy Spirit to come.

In this story from Acts Jesus acted out what he told the disciples in the gospel of John, “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate (John’s word for the Holy Spirit) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” Elsewhere, in chapter 7 of John, the gospel writer explains quite clearly that the gift of the Holy Spirit had to be after Jesus’ glorification. Glorification is a little abstract sounding, but for John it always has to do with Jesus’ exaltation, his being lifted up. First Jesus was lifted up on the cross, then lifted up out of death as resurrected, then finally lifted up into heaven at the right hand of the Father. Jesus’ ascension is the final lifting up, the final step of his glorification. Then comes the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus has to leave for the Holy Spirit to come. Jesus goes up, the Holy Spirit comes down. But why? Remember the scope of the mission there in verse 9: “to the ends of the earth.” This is a big mission — you know, the salvation of the whole world.

And the Jesus that trod the ground of this earth — even after the resurrection — was limited by his being an actual person with an actual body. Let’s call him celebrity Jesus — he was not always celebrated in his own time, of course — but let’s just imagine that the word got about Jesus and he became famous; not just “getting crushed by the peasant crowds in ancient Israel” famous, but worldwide superstar famous. Celebrity Jesus could not know everyone.

I have a cousin who is obsessed with some YouTube star named Grace Helbig, but I had to look that up, because I always remember her as Grace Hedwig — which is a confusion of Harry Potter and YouTube. I’m hopeless at pop culture. Anyway, Grace was holding a book signing. In Houston. My cousin drove down there; or rather convinced her mom to drive down to Houston. And she waited in line for hours. And she got to meet Grace Helbig for like 30 seconds! OMG! This was one of biggest things that’s ever happened to my cousin.

Grace Helbig is relatively famous; but not Brad Pitt famous. It’s still possible to meet her, albeit with a four hour drive and four hours in line. You can’t meet Brad Pitt. And even Brad Pitt isn’t Jesus famous. If Jesus were still here, celebrity Jesus style, it would be impossible for even a tiny fraction of people to meet Jesus. And even those whom he met, he wouldn’t know. I mean, I’m sure he’d be one of those people who, when you meet him, it feels like you’ve known him forever. But celebrity Jesus couldn’t know people in any intimate sense. There’d be no time. There would always be more books to sign, then next paparazzi question to answer, the speaking gig.

When it comes to loving seven billion people, which is God's purpose and desire, it's really helpful to not be bound by the constraints of an individual body.

Jesus isn't here. Which is good. Because if he were still here, you wouldn't know him.

Instead, the Holy Spirit comes. And the Holy Spirit, precisely because the Holy Spirit is spirit and not body, can be with all people. This is why we are baptized in the name of Jesus, but receive the Holy Spirit.

Please note, this is not some bait and switch tactic. It's not that we're promised Jesus but get the Holy Spirit instead. This is not like those real estate seminars — you know the one's "offered" by the whoever is currently popular on HGTV. And if you'll just pay to spend this day in a hotel ballroom learning their secrets for flipping houses, he'll come and meet you and teach you and too can be rich and successful. Except that when you get there, you find they just make an "appearance" via a prerecorded video intro, and then you have eight hours of sales pitches.

Look, is Jesus God? Yes. Is the Holy Spirit God? Yes. Is God the Father God? Yes. We believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So the Holy Spirit is not some consolation prize we're offered because Jesus can't handle the load. Rather, it is in the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus' redemption is made available to the whole world. We come to know the Father, we come to be transformed and redeemed in the image of Jesus, through the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, not through his bodily presence. Salvation doesn't come through a handshake.

Jesus' ascension to the right hand of the Father forces us to take the Holy Spirit seriously. If you haven't taken the Holy Spirit real seriously in life; if your Christian faith has been sort of a "me and Jesus" thing, I'd encourage you to do so. Because the bodily resurrected Jesus isn't here; Jesus is what's up. The Spirit is here; the Spirit is what comes down.

I would love to say more about what the Spirit does in our lives — we're both too ready to relegate the Spirit to the realm of the weird: speaking in tongues, being "slain in the Spirit," and ecstatic prophecy, and at the same time too unwilling to let the Spirit do strange and wonderful things in us. But I've probably gone on long enough. For today, remember this: at the ascension where Jesus goes is hidden by the cloud. But where Jesus isn't is very clear: he's not here. He'll come again, but right now, he isn't here.

Jesus goes up, the Holy Spirit comes down. And this is the glorious good news of our post-Easter faith. God saved us through the one man, Jesus Christ. But God

knows us, loves us, and empowers us through the Spirit which makes what Jesus did available to all, even unto the ends of the earth. Come Holy Spirit. Amen.