

Going Up?

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53; Psalm 95:1-7 5-04-08



I am sure I don't need to tell any of you that we have had an inordinate number of memorial services and burials around here lately. We had two graveside services this past week and three memorial services in the last three weeks. Amelia's service next week will be the fourth.

Every occasion has been a celebration of the life of the person who has passed on from this level of life to the next. Each celebration has been different because every person has been different. Many pastors I know prefer doing memorial services above the other services we hold for our communities. I am not sure why this is true of us, but I do think that this morning's reassuring scripture readings have something to do

with it. We believe that somehow we do move on from this earthly existence.

This is Ascension Sunday according to the church calendar. This Sunday is observed as the day on which Jesus, following his resurrection and many post-resurrection appearances, ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God.

The title of this meditation, not listed in the bulletin, is "Going Up?" In the ancient world, we need to remember that the cosmos was considered to exist in layers. One was the earth, the next was the sky and above that were the heavens. It was a simple concept.

We come from an age of space explorations and people on the moon and people spending time in space stations. While we know that we will probably not be "somewhere out there" sitting on a cloud or in outer space when we cross over, many do think that our souls journey on to a higher plane. I often think that what we believe we will move on to is what we will, indeed, move on to.

I base my thought on readings about out of body after death experiences in which some people have sensed they have entered a place of bright light and where they have been greeted by those who have passed on, while others see nothing at all. Raymond Moody's very popular old book, Life after Life, was one of the first explorations of this subject. Those written about, upon being brought back to life, reported that the next level of life was as they had expected, either glorious or nothing. So, I have come to think that what we believe will happen, happens.

I am not thinking of a future for me of lemonade and hammocks and angels' wings but of a time of greater spiritual growth and understanding, a time when I will "see more clearly what it is I see only dimly now." I hope this will be true. I also hope that the way

in which we move forward is in the spiritual sense and that my body, which has served me well, will be left behind. My mother always told me, as a young child, that one's body was "only a shell that remained behind while the essence of a person was the part that moved on." As I reflect on my many conversations with my mother, I realize what an interesting theologian and keen observer of life she was.

In our readings for this morning, the authors have Jesus ascending into heaven in his body. If you visit Israel a guide might point out to you the exact rock from which Jesus ascended. No one knows exactly what it was that happened or where it was and we need to remember that our New Testament selections were composed long after his death.

The point of these stories was to prove that Jesus returned to his Father, his God, from whence he had come to sit at God's right hand—in the seat of honor. Jesus, thus, completed the circle of life and paved the way to eternal life for those who believed in his message. He was shown to be the messiah, the person who fulfilled the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible.

Those who believe in the message of Christ believe that we will journey on to a better place. We, too, will complete the circle of life. Our memorial services are full of such language. We hold it to our hearts to comfort us and encourage us to move forward with courage and strength after we have lost a loved one. It is the essential belief on which our faith is built. If we are the followers of Christ, and, if we seek to follow the pathway he has set before us as we journey through this earthly life, intent on creating a better world for all who will come after us, we will be participants in the kingdom of God. We will return to the place from which we have come. It is in that place, we are told, our souls will find their hearts' true home at last.

-- Amen