

## *Up the Down Staircase*

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**Text:** Acts 1.1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Ephesians 1.15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what

are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

So, for some people, this reading gives the worst possible picture of what our faith is all about. Down here, up there. A Lord, who Lords it over everything and everyone. Power to the max. Dominion, authority, all things under his feet. You can see how it is a bit of a problem. It's the Empire written in black and white and called scripture. It's the patriarchal hierarchical early church messing up the message. Shouldn't we be against this? For isn't this exactly the kind of thing Jesus came to abolish? What is he doing going up like that; not only in this reading but in the story Tina read, when surely his primary objective was, if anything, to come down? To be here. To be with humanity. Not at God's right hand in the heavenly places, but right here. So for some it's a problem text.

For others, though, this is a glorious passage, with its curious mixture of intimacy and grandeur, of tender greeting and fabulous assurances. It promises that God's way of doing things, that is, by the power of love – that the power of God's love is actually greater than all those other powers. We read that it is *immeasurably* great. All those other authorities and dominions will be encompassed and overtaken by a new reality. Everything that has a name will be renamed, not only for now but for all the future. And the church, Christ's body, will experience the fullness of that holy and loving presence. As we listen to this, we hear that the writer of the letter to the Ephesians is praying for us, praying that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened, so

that we may understand the hope to which we have been called. We imagine some fine old Christian from the early church, a wise and compassionate sage, or a young idealist on fire for a new world, saying to us may the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, may you understand the hope to which you have been called. It's such a wonderful message.

*Still, he has put all things under his feet?*

As Lisa said in *Lectionary*, this passage is right on a big fault line. We all wobble here. It throws into stark relief the difficulties that Christians have wrestled with since the beginning. What kind of power is God's power? Is God the master of everything, or is God the loving source of everything? And you can see that what is at stake is what this implies about the way we should act. How does this ambiguous picture of God play out in the lives we live as citizens, and family members, and friends? Last week Jeff called our attention to the word used to describe the work that Christians are called to do. *Poesis* is creative work, new-making work – in the way that poetry is creative and new-making. Would the God who works within us and alongside humanity to bring us inexorably toward a new world, require a different poetry from the God who rules the universe from heaven? Can we settle it before communion – what's the answer?

Some of the Biblical scholars studying Ephesians believe that the letter was written partly to counter the growing Gnostic movement in the early church. The Gnostics claimed that salvation was based on a particular set of esoteric teachings, or *gnosis*, knowledge. You had to have the answers to be saved – a bit like knowing the secret password. On the contrary, says this letter, there are no passwords to be memorized. It is the living God who will give a spirit of wisdom, and an insightful eye to all who engage with integrity.

In the centuries-long conversation started by Jesus, it is this ongoing creative engagement which constitutes the vitality of the Christian faith. We still struggle to understand and to interpret the significance of the things he said and did. You can read the entire New Testament as an extended discussion of the questions, what was that? Who was that? What did he say? What are we supposed to do? We are invited

to remain on the fault line, and not to be too quick to pronounce that *this* is to be taken seriously and *that* is to be dismissed. We are supposed to stay in the discomfort zone.

Which brings us back to the picture of Jesus ascending into heaven, the central story of this splendid Christian festival of the Ascension. That is probably in the discomfort zone for most of us. Certainly the literal picture of it. But also the theological suggestion that the presence of God is moving away from humanity, not toward us as we like to think, but ...'up the down staircase'.

Still, we shouldn't just write it off as something those rather simple people back then would have believed. For we share with them the endless human fascination with the possibility that someone could defy gravity and 'go up on high'. Lots of people dream about it. *Beam me up, Scotty*. Or think of Superman, or Peter Pan. You can find this scene from the fifties musical on Youtube – first, says Mary Martin, I must blow the fairy dust on you. But then it is up to the children themselves. Just think lovely thoughts, and up you go .... And they do! And then everyone sings the song. And everything is different. They enter a new world.

There is something stunning and dumfounding about the moment in Acts too. Jesus is blithe as he reminds them that we have no idea about the political future, about the timing of revolutions and restorations. He promises them that in the power of the Holy Spirit they will be his witnesses, they'll do his work – and then off he goes, taken by a cloud. He has gone, and the followers stand gazing upward.

Another little fault line appears. Is this good news or bad news?

But the men in white appear, to chide and reassure: What are you looking at, he'll be back, you fools, just go and do the work. Break the bread, share the cup. Let us pray,

*God of heaven and of earth, Holy Mystery, we pray that by the power of your love, the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened, and that we will come to understand the hope to which we have been called. Amen.*