

# BOTH DIRECTIONS

June 2, 2019

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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa  
Text: Acts 1:1-11

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## SCRIPTURE

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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 during 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 toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward 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."

The Word of the Lord            Thanks be to God!

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## SERMON

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Last weekend, Disney released their latest movie, the live action version of their 1992 animated hit *Aladdin*. I have not seen it myself, but I have seen the old one, and I understand it sticks pretty close to the old script. It is, of course, making a huge amount of money at the box office, but the reviews have been kind of mixed. They are saying that it is okay, but does not exactly sweep you away. However, four-year-old Madison Jade has seen it and she has some very clear ideas about the plot line. She has something to say about that point in the movie when Aladdin takes the Princess Jasmine on a magic carpet ride and he sings a song about showing the princess "A Whole New World." Some of you may have seen this clip, where she gives Jasmine some advice.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y\\_ATGa8mtUk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_ATGa8mtUk) *(This is a 1 minute video of a little 4-year-old girl sitting in her car seat saying that Jasmine needs to go and see the world by herself. She doesn't need a boy to see the world and besides, there is not enough room on the magic carpet.)*

Isn't that great? Jasmine doesn't need a boy. She needs to go see the world all by herself. There is not enough room on the carpet, anyway. As the grandfather of four granddaughters I agree with Madison Jade 100%. You do not need a boy to show you the world. You can see the world all on your own. And, whatever else, make sure there is enough room on the carpet.

Fairy tales are great and we all enjoyed them when we were kids, and many of us still do today. They are sweet stories that sometimes teach important lessons. They help us to imagine all sorts of possibilities. Yet we all know they are complete fantasy. Even little ones, like Madison Jade, realize there is a clear line between make believe and real life. You don't have to be very old to come to the conclusion that fairy godmothers are not going to just show up when you need them. An evil spell cannot be broken by love's first kiss. And if you cannot tell the difference between your own grandmother and a wolf dressed in a nightgown, well then maybe you deserve to be eaten.

Now, today is the last Sunday of the Easter season. Next Sunday is Pentecost when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church. But we are still celebrating Easter and today is traditionally called Ascension Sunday. The church remembers the event described in our text for this morning when Jesus ascended back into heaven. Every year we have Ascension Sunday just as we have Sundays like Pentecost or World Communion or Transfiguration Sunday. Yet we don't often talk about it, and some years we ignore it entirely.

There are some good reasons for this. Ascension Sunday usually comes at a busy time of the year, as we have this morning with a new organist, PW Honorary Membership, a baptism and recognizing our high school graduates. Often Ascension Sunday coincides with Confirmation or Mother's Day or honoring long time members. So we head off in a different direction. But to be frank that is not the only reason. The biggest problem with the story of the Ascension is that it seems hopelessly outdated in terms of a modern scientific understanding of the universe. It seems more like a fairy tale than reality.

The story of the Ascension presupposes the antiquated notion of a three layered universe. Back in ancient times, they thought of the earth, as we experience it, as a flat middle layer. Below our feet, deep in the bowels of the earth, that is where they thought hell would be, the place of fire and torment. High above our heads, up beyond the clouds is a huge dome that they called the firmament, and the sun, moon and stars are hanging from this dome. Beyond that is heaven, with angels, pearly gates, harps and haloes. From the description we find in the book of Acts, that is where Jesus went, physically up into the sky, until he was covered by clouds. He was taken up into heaven. So just with this description, our modern scientific minds push the story of the Ascension off into the area of myth and legends, even fairy tales. It is a nice story; something children might enjoy, but not relevant for much of the real world today.

Since I am preaching on this story, you might rightly conclude that I want to challenge that notion. While the story of the Ascension doesn't quite fit in with space stations and the Hubble telescope, once we realize what is really going on it has a lot to say to us. So, what is this really all about? What are we to make of this rather odd story?

Well, one way to understand something is by looking at its opposite. In medicine for example they often discover how to kill off a virus by studying what encourages the virus to grow. Economists study the causes of a recession in order to understand what leads to prosperity. I remember doing mathematical proofs back in college. Sometimes if you need to prove A equals B, the only way is to suppose the opposite that A does not equal B. If you can show that it is impossible for A not to equal B, then A equals B must be true.

So, perhaps we can better understand the Ascension by looking at its opposite. The Ascension is the story of Jesus, the Son of God, leaving this earth and going back to heaven, returning to the presence of God. Therefore, the opposite would be Jesus leaving the presence of God and coming to this earth. The opposite of the Ascension would be the story of the Incarnation, the story of the Son of God becoming a human being.

We talk more about the Incarnation than we do about the Ascension, especially during Advent and Christmas. Though when you think about it, there are some similarities in the two stories. Both are clearly acts of God and not the result of any human effort. Both leave humans confused and require angels to explain what is going on. And both have a metaphysical mystery to them. Just how did God Almighty become a helpless baby lying in a manger? But then again, just how did Jesus ascend into heaven? Where did he actually go? We do not know the mechanics, because both the Incarnation and the Ascension are stories about God at work. They are not about genetics or aerospace.

During Christmas we focus our attention on the passages in Matthew and Luke, where angels appear to Joseph and Mary and tell them of a child who will be born. We have often heard these stories and contemplated with wonder and awe that God would be willing to go to such lengths to demonstrate such amazing love. Now rather than getting hung up with scientific implications I think it is far more helpful to think of the Incarnation as a story of direction; a movement or flow from God to humanity.

In Matthew's account of the birth of Christ, the child is called Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us." This is what we were talking about in Kyla's baptism a few moments ago, when we said "Love came to us in the form of Jesus Christ and received sin's worst." No matter how painful life might be; no matter how we have been knocked down; no matter what sorrow and difficulty we face; God is with us. Jesus knows what we are experiencing. He knows our pain, because he went through it himself. In 1979, a Dutch priest and theologian, Henri Nouwen, wrote a little book entitled, *The Wounded Healer*. It quickly became a standard text for most seminaries. The premise of this book is that sometimes the one who can best bring healing is someone who is wounded. That is to say, pastors and counselors can sometimes be the most help, not through their strengths but through their weaknesses. When a person is hurting, if the pastor is open about his or her own hurts or sorrow, then the individual will trust the pastor and follow as he or she leads towards healing and wholeness.

Nouwen sees Jesus as the embodiment of the wounded healer, the one who heals through his own suffering. Jesus was willing to be vulnerable and open, no matter the cost or how much it hurt. Therefore, the crucifixion is one great and final act of love. It is the completeness of Emmanuel. God is with us to the extreme of all we face, in all our sorrow.

While I do believe Nouwen has good insight, and the realization of the presence of God with us as we suffer is extremely helpful, I would argue that the Incarnation is only half of the story. Again, if you think of it as a story of direction, of a flow from God to humanity, there is a flow in the opposite direction. There is the story of humanity moving towards God. The full story of our salvation is a complete circle of God coming to be with us, so that we are able to go to be with God. It is a story that flows in both directions.

To explain why this is so important, I would remind you of the news this last week about the survival of Amanda Eller. On May 8, 35-year-old Amanda Eller went for a walk in the woods on the Hawaiian

island of Maui. She became disoriented and lost in the thick rainforest and unable to find her way back to her car. She did not have her cell phone with her. For over two weeks, Amanda wandered in the forest, feeding on berries and fruit, at one point sleeping in a wild boar's den. She fell off a ledge and injured her leg. She suffered sun burn and other skin injuries.

She ended up trapped in a ravine between two waterfalls, and it was there, 17 days after she went missing that some volunteers in a helicopter spotted her. Javier Cantellos, was one of those volunteers. He is actually a personal friend of Amanda, and he was the one they lowered down into the ravine. As he approached her, he hollered, "Amanda! Do you recognize this voice?" She yelled back, "Javier, is that you?"

It is a wonderful story, but I would like you to use your imagination at this point. Imagine that her friend, Javier, comes up to her, but then he unhitches himself and waves the helicopter away. And it flies off and disappears. Imagine how Amanda would react.

"What are you doing?" she yells. "I am here to suffer with you," says Javier. "I am in this with you. I will experience everything you are experiencing. I will be as hungry, as tired, as frightened as you are. We will face all this suffering together."

How much comfort and reassurance would that be to Amanda Eller? None, whatsoever. But that is not what happened, of course. They lowered a basket, hoisted Amanda and Javier back up and flew to the nearest hospital, with everyone elated. She has some healing to do, but Amanda Eller is going to be all right.

The story of our Lord Jesus Christ coming into this world is the story of a rescue mission. If you have doubts that we are in need of a rescue, I suggest you just watch the evening news or browse the Internet for a while. Once again on Friday, we were horrified by a slaughter at the hands of a deranged gunman. Day after day we are bombarded with stories of violence, hatred, brutality, racism, injustice, retribution, exploitation, and on and on it goes. The world is in a mess and no one has a way to pull us out. The good news of the gospel is that God does not stay off in a safe, sterile heaven and shake his head at the terrible things going on in this world. God comes to us. God becomes one of us. God hurts. God mourns. God suffers. God bleeds. The Incarnation makes Emmanuel a reality. God is indeed with us. But it goes both ways, in both directions. The other side of the Incarnation is the Ascension. Without the Ascension, the Incarnation becomes a grand, cosmic, New Age, I-feel-your-pain, sensitivity workshop. The good news of the gospel is that we are being rescued. We have been found. We have been strapped into the safety harness and the cable is taught. We are going to be pulled out of the mess we are in. Soon we will be safe, clean, dry and fed on solid ground.

So do not dismiss the story of the Ascension as something sweet and outdated, but not much more than a myth or a fairytale. Do not get hung up trying to figure out the science of the story. Look instead at the eternal flow of God's love. It flows in both directions. God in his wisdom has worked out a great and mighty plan being with us in all that we must endure. But God doesn't leave us. God rescues us, lifting us up out of our troubles, in a full complete circle. God is in control, doing all that needs to be done. That is a story that is worth telling and retelling and telling again. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.