

**“Up and Away”**  
**May 24, 2009**  
**Rev. Tadd Allman-Morton**  
**Westhampton Congregational Church, UCC**

When you imagine Earth, what does it look like? Now, I am talking about the whole planet, not just dirt or the earth we all walk on here in Westhampton, or Massachusetts, or even New England. What shape do you imagine the planet to be? Nowadays, we think of the earth as round, like a ball or marble. Now, when you imagine what is around the earth—outside our atmosphere—what does that look like? Is there anything nearby? Of course, the moon! And then further out are other planets, and the sun that we all orbit around through the year, and that makes up just one solar system. Now, there are thought to be about 200 billion stars in our galaxy alone, and many of them have their own planets circling them. So that’s a potential of hundreds of billions of solar systems in this one galaxy. And there are projected to be as many as 500 billion galaxies in the universe. Our little earth is in the midst of a *huge* place, isn’t it?

That wasn’t as true for the original Disciples of Jesus. They had a completely different way of understanding the universe. For them the earth was round, too. But not like a ball; like a plate. On this plate was every known country of the world, the oceans, forests, jungles and wild places. Underneath was Sheol, or the pit, where everyone was understood to go upon death to sleep dreamlessly forever. Up above the Earth was the dome of heaven. The greater lamp, the sun, went across the dome in the day. The lesser lamp, the moon, trekked across it at night. I think the sun and moon had places to stay on the off hours in the earth somewhere. The stars were understood to be little windows which revealed the glorious light of God and the angels shining through heaven’s dome. God was believed to be *that* close, even when furthest away from us. God was just beyond the dome of the sky, watching over everyone. The universe was a pretty small place, without billions of anything except maybe grains of sand.

This morning’s stories from Luke’s Gospel and the Book of Acts recount an idea that makes a lot more sense in the view of the universe held by the first Disciples than it does in our current model. It is the Ascension, which is possibly the most overlooked Christian holy day in Protestantism. The day of Ascension is observed forty days after Easter, which means it was actually last Thursday, but I didn’t think I could get us all to come out for an extra service the week before Memorial Day, so here we are.

I will confess, I wrestle with the idea of the Ascension because I cannot easily free myself from the modern view of the universe. When I imagine Jesus rising up into the sky in order to be with God, I find myself wondering where would his journey end? Where *could* it end? In the understanding of the ancient Disciples, Jesus would hang out with God just beyond the dome of heaven, and become part of the radiance of stars that shine in the night. But what about now?

We have learned that when earth's atmosphere ends that outer space begins. We have flown up there and back often enough to notice that God is not there. At least not visibly. So, would God linger on the rim of the solar system? Or the galaxy? Or five galaxies away? Or a hundred? Where *is* the edge of heaven in a universe full of billions and billions of stars, and solar systems and galaxies? And how does living in an enormous universe influence God's closeness to us?

One view is that as we have developed scientific understanding and our history has unfolded, we have progressively crowded God out of the cosmos, and away from humanity. The sun being the middle of the solar system created doubts in the Church's view of the cosmos. Darwin's theory of evolution challenged the story of creation in the book of Genesis. A long litany of human atrocities to one another continues to challenge notions of God's providence or goodness. Bit by bit, the places where God has conventionally been understood to exist have been questioned, challenged; and God—for many people—has become more and more distant.

Part of the story of the Ascension would seem to support the idea of a distant God. After all, Jesus goes *up and away* from the Disciples, withdrawing to the furthest point imaginable to them. It doesn't seem to support the idea of God-with-us, or Emmanuel—the very idea which Christians understand Jesus as having been born to promote. Where is the good news in God getting *further away* from us? And yet the reaction of the earliest Disciples to the event of the Ascension *is* that of celebration. When Jesus ascends this morning's narrative from Luke concludes: "And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."<sup>1</sup> I am not sure that worship and joy would be my first reactions; except for the fact that Jesus makes a promise before parting ways with the first Disciples. And it is a big one; Luke puts it this way: "I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been *clothed with power from on high*."<sup>2</sup> The Book of Acts says this: "(Y)ou 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*."<sup>3</sup> Before Jesus departs, he promises the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Disciples of his time, and to us by extension. Jesus may be withdrawing from their *every day sight*, but the Spirit will come to transform them into acting as Jesus in the world. And not just in the world, but all the way *to the ends of the earth*—throughout every country, the oceans, forests, jungles and wild places; to the borders of Sheol, and right up to the dome of heaven itself. These are the ends of the earth as the ancients understood them. Theirs was a *cosmic* assignment. They were being called by God's to work throughout the *universe!*

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 24:52-53.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 24:49.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:8.

God is not going away during the ascension, but preparing to go cosmic. The healing work that God performed through Jesus will no longer be restricted to a single body, but will soon be spread out among all believers everywhere. When Pentecost comes, God's Spirit is poured out upon thousands, not just one, or a dozen, but, bit by bit, upon all who would receive it. Jesus was taken *up and away* so that the message of God's presence would be made available more widely.

Jesus is taken *up* as an illustration that God is forever over our heads. God is always beyond our full understanding, and beyond our ability to contain, no matter how hard we may try. Jesus is taken *away* to remind Disciples of all times that we are to follow in Christ's way. We are not just to venerate Jesus. Praising his name is not enough. We are called to follow him in his work of proclaiming that God is with us, whoever we are and wherever we are. No matter which country, forest, ocean, jungle or wild place we may frequent, God is with us. Whether we feel like we are mired in the depths of Sheol, or dancing with the angels on the dome of heaven, God is with us!

And the Disciples got it! God bless them! The same ragtag troop who constantly misinterpreted Jesus during his earthly mission are at last able to understand the wider and deeper purposes of God. They understand that a withdrawal of Jesus from them means that the Holy Spirit will be available to everyone who feels moved to follow in Christ's path.

So, where is the edge of heaven in a universe full of billions and billions of stars, and solar systems and galaxies? Not *even* as far away as the sky. The good news of God-with-us is that the membrane which separates the divine from the human is not some imperturbable dome, but the gates of our hearts, which can open any time.

And how does living in an enormous universe influence God's closeness to us? If anything, I think it increases God's importance and value. I have never understood how discovering other worlds led people to think that God was less present in the cosmos, or to believe that life on earth was somehow less significant. After all, all of God's creatures—human and otherwise—are the only life viable forms we know of for certain in the entire universe. Doesn't that call us to a deeper reverence for one another?

The universe is indeed a huge place. But God is closer to all of us than even our own breath. The good news of the Ascension is that God is on the move! God is working to invite more people into telling others that God is near to them, indeed. And we are all invited into spreading that good news from here to the ends of the earth. As Disciples we are all heirs to the same Holy Spirit; the same Holy Spirit which we will celebrate next week at Pentecost; the same Spirit which anointed Peter and John, and Mary and the rest to spread the word about God's love. So,

friends, let's join them in that work! Let others know that God wants to be with them now and always, and invite them into that circle of grace we find here together.  
Come, Holy Spirit, come!

Amen.

### **Luke 24:44-53**

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”  
45Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”  
50Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

### **Acts 1:1-11**

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning  
2until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3After 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. 4While 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; 5for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”  
6So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But 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.” 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They 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.”