

# Love Lifts Us Up

An Ascension sermon with readings from Acts 1:6-11; John 17:1-11; and 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

Don Friesen  
Ottawa Mennonite Church  
May 16, 1999

Many songs and prayers ascended to heaven on Thursday as some four to five hundred Mennonites stood on the steps of Parliament Hill and sang and prayed for peace in the Balkans. It seemed quite appropriate to do so on Thursday, for Thursday was Ascension Day, one of the more under-rated Christian holy days. In some churches even Mother's Day receives more mention than Ascension! But then, as someone noted, who wants to commemorate the day we all got left behind?

Ascension marks the moment in Acts, chapter 1, when, after his final appearance to his disciples, Jesus was, in the words of Luke, "lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." (Acts 1:9) In some European churches there is a hole in the ceiling, right above the altar, and on Ascension Day a Christ figure that has been placed on the table is pulled up through the hole in the ceiling, leaving everyone in church, like the disciples in Acts, standing there "gazing up toward heaven". (Acts 1:10) Then, after a moment, a dove is lowered through the same opening. Some churches add a more imaginative and enticing touch, and after the moment of waiting and suspense, out of the same opening through which the Christ figure ascended comes a shower of almonds, nuts, raisins and other treats! I don't know if these treats are symbolic of the gifts of the Spirit or just make for a good feast, but it certainly makes for a more memorable Ascension Day!

Theologically, Ascension marks the moment when the One who became a human being in the mystery of the Incarnation returned to God in the mystery of the Ascension. Ascension completes the cycle of descent and ascent. (Ephesians 4:10 uses this terminology) By being "taken up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16) and exalted at the right hand of God (Acts 5:31), Jesus is said to extend his dominion over all of creation. Paul, in Ephesians, says that when Jesus "ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive...." (Ephesians 4:8) According to 1 Peter (3:22), Christ's ascension marks his definitive victory over sin and death and marks the end of Satan's dominion.

The theological importance of the Ascension is underlined by its central place in patristic literature, in the writings of Augustine, as well as in early Christian art. The major Renaissance and Romantic poets were also drawn to the Ascension, seeing in it the exaltation and glorification of humanity. (David Jeffrey, Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature, page 57) Now, in my books, that's taking the Ascension a little further than a biblical understanding of sin warrants, for I don't see much evidence of humanity's "rise from barbarism" as reflected in Wordsworth, just because our "smart bombs" can now bomb bridges, embassies, and refugees from greater heights, but I like the idea anyway because it makes the Ascension more than another mystery moment in Jesus' life that has no bearing on our own!

## Ascension Began a "Spiral Of Ascension"

Dylan Thomas, in one of his poems, chants the glory of a humanity lifted up with Christ in a "spiral of ascension" ("Vision and Prayer"). I like that thought, for if the ascension of

Christ marks his definitive dominion, then surely it should have some bearing on humanity, in general, and Christians, in particular, propelling us in upward ways.

It is certainly the testimony of Scripture that God is a God who lifts those who have fallen. God “raises up the poor from the dust; He lifts the needy from the ash heap...,” reads 1 Samuel (2:8), likewise the psalms (113:7). God is “the one who lifts up my head,” says the psalmist (3:3), “the one who lifts me up from the gates of death....” (9:13). “The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down....” (146:8) “The Lord lifts up the downtrodden,” continues the psalmist (147:6). And many places in Scripture attest to God as the One who “lifts” those “who are slow and need help, who lack strength and abound in poverty” out of their lowly condition. (Sirach 11:12)

Many, many times in Scripture Israel is reminded how God brought them “up from the land of Egypt,” out of demeaning slavery, and led them safely through “a land of deserts and pits,” says Jeremiah (2:6). Jeremiah was himself very familiar with pits, having been put in one by his detractors (Jeremiah 18:20-22), much like Joseph was put into a pit by his jealous brothers. In fact, Sheol, or hell itself is seen as the ultimate pit, and salvation, in biblical terms, is portrayed as a rescue from these pits, be the pits earthly, spiritual or eternal! To those entrapped in pits the Lord takes pity. “In His love and in His pity he redeem(s) them; he lift(s) them up and carrie(s) them,” says Isaiah (63:9). The prophet Ezekiel is especially fond of referring to the spit of God “lifting him up” (e.g., Ezekiel 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 43:5) And Jesus’ mission is, in part, to bring “down the powerful from their thrones, and lift...up the lowly....” (Luke 1:52)

In biblical terms, however, salvation is more than a series of pit rescues. I like the description given in one of the apocryphal books, where it says that God “lifts up the soul and makes the eyes sparkle; He gives health and life and blessing.” (Sirach 34:20) A spiral of ascension that moves beyond pit rescues to sparking eyes!

Ascension takes places forty days after the resurrection, and not only does it complete the “spiral of ascension” that began with Easter, it acts as a metaphor of what is possible in the power of the resurrection. We are empowered, literally, to rise above things that pull us down. The Ascension conveys, poetically and pictorially, the conviction that as Christ transcended this world, we too can rise above its pettier machinations.

It’s a good feeling to be rescued from a pit; it’s an even better feeling to rise above things. I remember, a number of years ago, being a go-between between two members of my family, and in so doing having to absorb a lot of hostility from one member that was aimed at me but was really meant for the other member. In times past I would have gotten ensnared by these dynamics, and would have responded in a defensive manner. This time around, even though the stakes were higher than usual, I kept my calm and was able to rise above the fray. It was a great feeling, and also left me just short of feeling smug and self-righteous.

The testimony of Scripture is that we can live triumphantly. Even while living in this world, it’s possible to live as if we were not entirely of this world (John 17:14-16). We can grow in Christian faithfulness. Christian life is more than a pit-free existence; it encourages us to advance to greater heights.

## Advancement and Growth

Now, not all advancement is of God. The Apostle Paul tells the Galatians, "I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age," but Paul was not particularly proud of his advancement in zealotry! (Galatians 1:14) The advancement whereof the Scriptures speak is not necessarily the advancement put forth by doctrines of "manifest destiny," which often has the corollary that others' destinies are less manifest than our own.

No doubt there are other theories of advancement that do not sit easily with the biblical ideal. A century and a half ago an ordained minister (Horatio Alger) wrote a series of novels with a simple storyline: the heroes of his books gained success by leading exemplary lives and struggling valiantly against poverty and adversity. A noble plot line, and even if it wore a bit thin after more than a hundred books written to the same formula, more than twenty million of his books were sold during the author's lifetime!

One cannot but applaud underprivileged youths who win fame and wealth by practising such virtues as honesty, diligence, and perseverance, but more often than the boys' success in these stories depended upon the gratitude and patronage of a wealthy benefactor. That too sounds virtuous, but there are rarely sufficient wealthy benefactors around, or sufficient ones around that are in a generous mood, or sufficient ones around that themselves believe in honesty, diligence, and perseverance. One cannot depend upon this formula for success. It's a little like putting your faith in the airline pilot who, when his plane started rolling and lurching, appeared in the passenger cabin wearing a parachute, and announced to the passengers, "Everyone keep calm; I'm going for help!"

Alongside the Horatio Alger stories, though of considerably more literary merit, must be placed one of Franz Kafka's novels (*Amerika*), whose protagonist is a bumbling, hopelessly naive, and confused but well-meaning young man who has been sent to the West, but whose stereotypical view of the West as the promised land, free of old-world corruption, produces difficulties. He stumbles his way through the complexities of the Western landscape, refusing to admit that his idealized vision of the brave new world is at variance with reality, particularly the chasm between the very rich and very poor. It's an Horatio Alger story in reverse. Like Alger's heroes, Kafka's hero is optimistic and determined, but unlike them he continues going downhill, being destroyed by the very values and culture in which he has put his faith.

The Christian view of advancement shares with Kafka a lingering suspicion of formulaic success, for the simple reason that even the best of us, like the Apostle Paul, do not always "do what (we) want (to do), but...do (in fact) the very thing (we) hate" to do. (Romans 7:15) There is in the Scriptures a hardy recognition that advancement of the Gospel, collectively or personally, rarely proceeds in a straight line. More often than not our Christian pilgrimage looks like a series of meanderings, as we bumble along, insights gained often forgotten, and detours taken because the cost of discipleship was simply too high!

There is ample recognition in our reading from 1 Peter that life for Christians does not necessarily advance smoothly. Life, for the believers to whom Peter was writing, was literally "the pits". Believers were having to endure severe suffering and persecution, "reviled" and tested simply because of their Christian faith. It seemed the very opposite of advancement, but far from cowing them, they appeared to take it in stride. Peter reminds them, "Beloved, do not be surprised...as though something strange were

happening to you.” (1 Peter 4:12) Don’t “be unduly alarmed,” says another translation, “as though this were some abnormal experience.” (PHL) You can expect to meet Kafkaesque difficulties, but in spite of these nefarious obstructions, Peter encourages his fellow Christians to “rejoice” (4:13). “You are blessed,” he says (4:14). “And after you have suffered for a little while,” he says, “the God of all grace ...will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” (4:10)

Our faith tradition recognizes that tyrants can gain power, that charisma often holds more appeal than character, and that bad things do happen to good people. Nevertheless, there remains in Scripture a deep belief that God’s dominion will ultimately be complete. Indeed, despite opposition and setbacks, the “word of God,” records Luke in the book of Acts, “continued to advance and gain adherents.” (Acts 12:24)

The Christian spirit is, despite the recognition of human sin and frailty, ever hopeful, maintaining the belief that each of us can grow in faith. We are encouraged by the New Testament to “grow in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10), to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18), and to “grow into salvation” (1 Peter 2:2). Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, encourages us to grow into “maturity,” to grow “to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Oh, Paul too has his eyes open. He realizes that all sorts of “craftiness,” “trickery” and deceit may be our undoing (4:14), but he remains hopeful that we will “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...” (4:15)

## **Upgrade Your Life and Faith**

A human being is, from embryo to grave, a changing being, who can ascend or descend, according to free-will, but with Christ’s Ascension the upward pull became stronger. The Ascension proclaims victory, both for Christ and for Christians, helping us to ascend from ignorance to knowledge; from destructive behaviour to constructive behaviour; from selfishness to self-less-ness. We ascend in faith and life as we “lay aside every weight” (Hebrews 12:1) that pulls us down, and “press on,” as Paul says, to that “upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:14, RSV)

With Christ’s ascension the power of the resurrection is fully available to us, empowering us to rise above those things that normally would pull us down. The love and power of the Risen Christ lifts us up where we belong, out of the pits of ignorance, drunkenness and despair; out of the passion pits of lust, debauchery, and greed; out of the pits of anger and hate.

A mother, exasperated by the untoward behaviour of her five-year-old, assigned him to sit in her closet until he came to his senses. She left him there, but from the room came a series of strange sounds, followed by an unsettling silence. She went back to look at him, only to find that he had pulled down all her clothes and was sitting in the middle of them with scowl on his face. “What on earth are you doing, Jimmy?” she asked. To which he replied, “I spit all over your clothes, I spit all over your shoes, and now I’m just sitting here waiting for more spit!”

What may be faintly humorous in a five-year-old’s behaviour is quite unseemly in an adult. We have been schooled by a succession of psychologies which have lauded the cathartic and beneficial effects of expressing our anger. It was quite refreshing, therefore, to read of a recent study that found that venting your spleen results in greater tension than remaining calm in the face of provocation. The advice of Dr. Bushman and

his research team at Iowa State University is to take a breath and avoid seeking catharsis. "Expressing it just makes it worse," said Bushman. By expressing it people are effectively practising at being upset and this raises their discontent. ("It's better to bottle up your anger," Ottawa Citizen, May 9, 1999)

Christian ethics is built upon the insistence that things that hurt and destroy must not only be avoided but replaced -- exchanged for something better! Anger must be "traded in" for love. The "works of the flesh" -- fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like -- must be replaced by the "fruit of the Spirit" -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:19-21, 23) Lying must be replaced by truthfulness. Stealing must be tossed out in favour of honest effort. Depressing conversation must be exchanged for words of encouragement and hope.

The latter is especially hard for those of us who have discovered the power of words to wound others, indeed, have even practised at it. Even careless words can inflict a lot of damage. Messages like "What's the matter with you?" or "How many times do I have to tell you?" repeated often enough leave a negative residue in our spirits.

The fruit of the Spirit requires cultivation, however, if it is to replace the destructive works of the flesh. The recently deceased Victor Frankel said that some of his fellow prisoners in the concentration camp at Dachau yearned desperately for their freedom, but had been held captive so long, that when they eventually were released, "they walked out into the sunlight, blinked nervously, and then silently walked back into the familiar darkness of the prisons...." (Man's Search for Meaning)

Similarly, when we cease expending notable effort to ascend in our spiritual life, the "upward call" may lose its pulling power after a while. If we are held back by fear or by anger, or if we choose to be pulled down by various attitudes or appetites, the invitation to advance, spiritually, may grow quieter with time, and eventually be no longer heard. Despite numerous failures and setbacks, it's important to keep the upward appeal vital by subjecting ourselves to it through regular worship, study and prayer.

### **Become a "Lifter"**

One of the other things we can do to help us ascend, spiritually, is to hold before us the example of Christians who elevate our vision and behaviour. I think, for example, of the Albanian nun (Mother Teresa) who, despite years among the most wretched of human beings, was determined to regard every person in the world as a child of God, deserving of our love and respect. I think of men like William Booth, whose "army" -- an army focussed on salvation rather than obliteration -- has lifted up those otherwise pulled down by degrading and dehumanizing circumstances. For well over a century this army has brought salvation, in its most well-rounded sense, to many people.

Love lifts us up, and once we have experienced the "uplifting" power of the Risen and Ascended Christ, we feel compelled to lift up others in his name. May God continue to elevate our vision and show us glimpses of His glorious Kingdom, that our hearts may be uplifted, and our spirits enriched. AMEN

---

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.