

The Gospels tell us in a few different ways the story of the ascension Jesus, the story of his rising to higher ground.

While the version we heard this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, it spills beyond the Gospels, as this story is told in the Book of Acts too.

But I recently heard a different idea about how this ascension of Jesus might have happened.

Now, I don't know if this is *exactly* what occurred, but I know that this story is true.

After Jesus died, he began appearing to his friends.

This, of course, usually happened when a group of them got together to talk about him – retelling his jokes and remembering what Jesus taught them.

On this particular day, a really large crowd of his friends had gathered, and what do you know, Jesus showed up, too.

He began to teach them, saying, “Resist! Pray for enemies! Turn the other cheek! Go the extra mile!

And of course, love one another. Every single other.”

When he had said all this, a voice from the heaven boomed down, “ASCEND!”

And so, he did.

He spread out his arms, looked up to heaven with a smile, and slowly began to rise.

The disciples watched, stunned, and suddenly, Mary, realizing what was happening, gave a shout, backed up to get a running start, and LEAPT up to grab Jesus's ankle.

"I'm coming too!" she cried.

John, seeing what was happening, jumped up and grabbed Jesus' OTHER ankle.

Jesus, slightly concerned, stopped and looked down at them and then back up to heaven and asked: "God, what do I do?"

And God said, "ASCEND!"

And so, all together, holding on to one another, lifting each other up, they all began to rise.

Now the other disciples, seeing Mary and John rising with Jesus, they wanted to go, too, so suddenly all of Jesus' friends are jumping and grabbing onto their ankles.

And Mary and John and Jesus reached out to pull them up until there was a small pyramid of people swinging from each other in the sky.

A little alarmed, Jesus asked again, "What do I do, God?"

Again the voice from heaven BOOMED, "ASCEND!"

And all together, holding on to one another, lifting each other up, they all began to rise.

Then people from all over, folks who had seen Jesus' miracles or heard him preach, people who had seen the friends of Jesus feed the hungry and show kindness,

*they* began to jump up and grab onto the lower-most disciples, and slowly, all together, holding on to one another, lifting each other up, they all began to rise.

But a little girl way at the bottom shouted, "Stop, wait! I want to bring my dog!"

And Jesus, WAY up at the top yells back down, "Try to hurry - I don't know how this works!"

So the little girl, still scanning the horizon, reached out and grabbed a tree and the branch held on tight.

Everyone kept rising and the tree began to rise too, and it looked like the tree would be uprooted, but the tree curled its roots and held on tight to the earth.

And the earth started to rise, too, but it reached out to the sea, and the sea grabbed hold with its waves and HELD ON tight and no one let go and slowly, all together, holding on to one another, lifting each other up, *the whole world was drawn closer to God.*

*(Story by the Rev. Lori Walke, Associate Pastor of Mayflower Congregational Church in Oklahoma City, OK.)*

So, the ancient way of understanding the universe was 3-tiered.

Heaven, with God, was above, the earth was here, the middle tier, and hell, or the underworld was below.

This story presumes that God is above, and for the purposes of the story, it works.

But as I said last week, we now know that God is not other, beyond, or away from us.

God is not up there, even though we still use language with that implication.

God isn't above us, God is around, within and between.

And I don't know where heaven is, but I am not sure that it's above us either.

What if it's just another plane that's layered on top of our reality?

What if everyone in heaven exists in, amongst and around us, we just can't see them?

I know plenty of people who have said they've felt their loved ones' presence before.

So there might be something to be said for this idea that God isn't only above, but within and amongst as well, maybe even below too.

The traditional interpretation or understanding of this passage is that it's when Jesus left the disciples, for good.

He was resurrected on Easter, then he hung around Earth for 40 days, and then ascended into heaven.

The Feast of the Ascension was actually last Thursday because it was literally 40 days after Easter, but I digress.

While the traditional understanding is that this story has served to explain how Jesus left this earth, ultimately and for good, I see the passage in a different way, which was beautifully explained in the story I just told.

Maybe Jesus didn't leave us at all, but instead he took us with him on his journey towards God.

This idea of the heavenly ascent and the 3-tiered universe, is based on the assumption that a prophet could attain access to divine secrets, or get divine approval.

But we know that nobody has anymore access to God, God's love or God's wisdom, than anyone else.

Maybe Jesus was trying to be the bridge between us and God, showing us that we all have access to God.

Maybe Jesus was the final proof that we, and the disciples, need in order to understand that Jesus is the conduit between God and us.

There are no tiers or levels of superiority or closeness to God.

Now we can celebrate that the connection between us and God has been forged through Jesus, and is unbroken.

Jesus going up with his hands out, is him saying, I am the connection, but I need you to hold on as well.

We need to do our part in terms of our faithfulness to God, this isn't a passive experience in which we just levitate or somehow float through life with a close relationship with God.

We need to stick our hands out and hold onto Jesus, to be active disciples, living testimonies of the Good News.

He's willing to meet us halfway and walk beside us as we try to live into the Gospel message, but we have to do our part by making faithful decisions day in and day out.

If we don't stay faithful, then we'll drop Jesus' hand and lose our connection to him, his call for us and our devotion to God.

But did you notice in the story, that we all aren't holding hands with Jesus directly.

We are holding each other's hands, and that draws us closer to Jesus.

We are responsible for each other.

If we let go of our commitment to the Gospel message, that means we're probably also letting down people we love.

Treating them in ways we shouldn't, perhaps letting them down, straining the faith that they have in the goodness of people.

The truth is that we are the body of Christ, we are responsible not only for maintaining our individual relationships with God through emulating Jesus, but we are collectively responsible to each other.

We rise and fall together.

Each of our actions pulls humanity that much closer, or that much further from God's love.

Salvation is often seen as individual, but in this story of the whole earth being drawn closer to God, it's communal.

Or, as one commentator said, *"The point of Ascension is perspective."*

*Rising to the clouds gives us a broader perspective on our lives and the planet.*

*Rather than individualistic images of salvation and personal well-being, the Ascension challenges us to bring heaven to earth, that is, to live Jesus' values in our world...*

*When we live from a higher perspective, we can transcend our own self-interests to embrace the well-being of the whole earth, including strangers, enemies, and non-humans."* (Epperly, Bruce. "Going Up? Reflections on Ascension Day." May 29, 2011.)

For the Gospel of Luke, this is where the story ends, it's the end of his Gospel.

But for us, it's just the beginning.

It's the final "proof" that we needed in order to understand that we are forever intertwined with each other and with Jesus, who connects us to God.

Jesus didn't leave us, he took us with him, saying, we need to go, but we can only go together if you hang on, all of you.

Because if you let go, everyone below you falls.  
We flourish or we fail together.

So friends, hold tight to one another, that we all might be drawn that much closer to God and to each other.

Amen.

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