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Luther Memorial Church
Acts 1.1-11; Psalm 47
Ephesians 1.15-23; St. Luke 24.44-53

God has gone up with a shout...

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? ... This Jesus will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Ascension of Our Lord May 13, 2010

Last Saturday afternoon, my brothers and I were standing on a hill in Northwestern Oregon. The place overlooks rolling hills, dotted here and there by fir trees, barns, and farm houses. From time to time we glanced toward the mountainous horizon and the blue sky, then back again to the earth beneath our feet. We were standing on the grave of our youngest brother, the same ground in which we had placed our father's ashes nearly a year ago. I had gone home on May 6th in order to help with all sorts of post-burial decisions—the most pressing at that moment being the selection of a headstone. Not for the first time, we could have used a sister. A group of five men standing in a cemetery trying to make a decision is surely a recipe for anything but a decision. So we talked about most everything but the decision we had come to make—casting glances first up, and then over, and then down. In some ways, it didn't feel much different than a typical church meeting—stuck somewhere between heaven and earth, everybody avoiding the obvious so as not to hurt somebody else's feelings.

Why do you stand looking up into heaven? Apparently "looking up into heaven" isn't the Ascension's purpose. But, then, it's not as though the church can quit "looking up" just because a couple of strangers say Jesus will come in the same way he went: Up?

We would have done the same. One can imagine that people of the first century would not have behaved any differently than we had we seen someone "ascend" into the sky without the aid of a catapult, a balloon, or a rocket.

How does a person go up into the sky without the aid of a rocket, a balloon, or a catapult? It does little good to talk in terms of metaphor—at least within the context of Luke's account—when the phenomenon of ascending, of "going up into the heavens," leaves the observers gaping at the sky. They were looking up *because they had seen someone go up*. The men in question would not likely have stood looking up into the sky if the Jesus after whom they were looking hadn't actually "gone up." Had Luke written the Ascension as a metaphor for, say, human improvement, "the elevation of the soul," or "the contemplation of the hidden God," then he wouldn't have written the men as actually looking into the clouds—he would have had them doing meditation, engaging in

spiritual reflection, reading Robert Schueller, or praying with Norman Vincent Peale. But Luke doesn't picture them doing religious devotion or self improvement exercises; instead he has them "looking up into heaven."

Luke has other fish to fry. He means to say that in going up Jesus is coming back. The strangers say, "This Jesus whom you saw ascend into heaven will return in exactly the same way." In other words, Jesus will return to earth. In still other words, though the Ascension may be heaven oriented in terms of direction it is earth bound in terms of purpose. Jesus ascends into heaven not for the benefit of clouds or angels or even God, but in order to benefit denizens of earth, order to benefit us and even the earth itself.

It's a curious thing, but Jesus goes away in order come back. He goes away from us to be nearer to us. The further removed from us in space, the nearer he is to us in faith. The Eucharist is the great example of this truth. The more we consume Christ, the more we eat and drink him in bread and wine, the more he is himself—the more he is *for us*. Unlike other food and drink, Christ Jesus does not diminish through consumption; he does not decrease through use; he rather increases. I suppose in some sense, the only way to diminish Christ (at least among human beings) is to use him less, to eat and drink him less. The primary way to have Christ more fully is to eat and drink him more frequently, more faithfully, more earnestly.

In this regard, there is more than a little wisdom to the practice of receiving Christ daily in the Eucharist. By the same token, the Eucharist infects us with the insight that *everything* we eat and drink proclaims the mystery of Christ present and alive in the *eharitized* cosmos; Christ always and in every way coming for us via earthly means.

Therefore, we assemble on Ascension Day not merely because Christ has gone into heaven, but because in going up he is nearer to us than the food and drink in our bellies; in ascending, he becomes food and drink for our faith, for our bodies, for our souls. As Jesus Christ draws nearer and nearer the Father by "going up into heaven," so also he draws nearer and nearer to us in, with, and under the bread and wine of earth. In ascending to the Father, Christ gets closer to us than our own flesh and blood, closer to us than our own cells, closer to us than our own DNA. In ascending to the Father, Christ *has become* the DNA of our faith—the hidden yet revealed code by which we are made to be who we really are—children of earth made children of heaven.

Even as we stand gazing into heaven, transfixed by death and the grave stones of earth, Christ comes to us and promises that he is always with us, always for us, always God's gift for life and faith here, now, and forever. In this way, we are free to live and serve as he has called us—even when we don't know up from down, in Christ we are free. *God has gone up with a shout*: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.