

"Lifted Up"

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First Presbyterian Church
Independence, MO
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Old Testament: Psalm 68:4-10, 32-35

New Testament: Acts 1:6-11

msnbc.com reports that a Chicago area man named Edward Gardner was killed Monday helping a family of wild ducklings get off the roadway. He was hit by a passing vehicle. "It was no surprise what he did," said Gardner's best friend, Jim Gollwitzer; "that he would risk his life to save another. That's the kind of guy he was. Just an amazing spirit."

Gardner was driving along the interstate when he saw the ducklings – saw what didn't belong there – and he decided to do something about it. He just had to help the ducklings get back to the place where they belonged, and he was willing to put himself out there to do it.

Everything and everyone has a place where they belong. When it comes to our Lord and Savior, many of us wonder about the place where Jesus is? No one alive has ever seen Jesus in person, or can say with certainty where he is. But there was a time when people did see Jesus and they knew where he was from one moment to the next. During his earthly ministry, Jesus' place was right beside his disciples. Then, when Jesus had died, the disciples placed him in a tomb – that was his place. And after being raised from the dead, Jesus was showing up in numerous places – outside the tomb, on the road to Emmaus, around the supper table with the two men he met along the way, and finally, in the upper room with the closest of his disciples.

The risen Lord stayed in that place alongside his disciples 40 days preparing the disciples for the work ahead of them; for their God-given mission. And then he left that place; he took up a new place, *his* place alongside God the Father in heaven.

Acts tells us that Jesus was taken up into heaven. Why was Jesus taken up? Why didn't he stay to lead the disciples in their God-given mission? Where is this heaven Jesus was taken into, and why did he have to go? Don't we wonder such things? In know we do. I know we do because there were about 100 of you asking such questions about God and heaven during Sunday school the past three weeks. We were challenged to rethink our preconceived notions about heaven; that it's someplace up in the sky; about God; that he – *he* – *is* some white-haired, bearded man sitting on a throne with Jesus at his right hand.

How do you feel about questioning such things? Does it threaten your faith? I don't think so; not really. Most of us believe that much of the Bible is metaphorical, symbolic; that the Bible uses simplified examples of what God and heaven are like and where they are; that this symbolic language helps to communicate an inner, spiritual truth that's beyond our grasp as human beings.

We believe this because, actually, Jesus tells us there are things in the Bible that are beyond our understanding and direct knowledge. In today's New Testament lesson, the disciples ask, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" And Jesus answers, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." And as he speaks, "Jesus (is) lifted up, and a cloud (takes) him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.'"

In other words, you're looking in the wrong place. Jesus was lifted up from you, yes, but don't stand around looking up toward "heaven" as if you know where he went, as if you can just sit there and at any moment you'll see him return, see him take up where he left off.

Jesus wasn't taken up so that someday he could return to complete the mission. *Jesus isn't "on hold" in heaven.* Jesus was taken up so that the mission could move beyond what an earth-bound Jesus could accomplish. And the mission continues even with Jesus in heaven; the mission continues precisely because Jesus is in heaven, *and* because heaven is unattainable by us as earthly creatures.

I mean, if we could get to heaven on our own, then all our efforts would be focused on us getting to heaven. But that's not the mission Jesus gave us. Our mission is not to stare up into the sky waiting for Jesus to return, or to sit around in relative comfort wondering how to follow him. What kind of mission would that be – just sitting around waiting, with nothing to really do?

In his book "Chop Wood, Carry Water," Rick Fields tells the story of "a man who died and found himself in a beautiful place, surrounded by every conceivable comfort. A white-jacketed man came to him and said, 'You may have anything you choose – any food – any pleasure – any kind of entertainment.' The man was delighted, and for days he sampled all the delicacies and experiences ... he had dreamed (of) on earth. But one day he grew bored ... and calling the attendant ... he said, 'I'm tired of all this. I need something to do. What kind of work can you give me?' The attendant sadly shook his head and replied, 'I'm sorry, sir. That's the one thing we can't do for you. There is no work here for you in this place.' To which the man answered, "That's a fine thing. I might as well be in hell." The attendant said softly, "Where do you think you are?"

If you want to make your life heaven on earth, find a mission worth living for. Find your God-given mission, and don't let anything get in your way. Most people who find their God-given mission are led to it by someone who's on a mission from God, someone willing to do what it takes to lead another person in following Jesus Christ.

The mission that God has for us, as followers of Jesus, is the same mission that Jesus gave to the disciples. "You will receive power," said Jesus, "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." That's your God-given mission, to receive the Holy Spirit and be a witness for Jesus Christ. *That's how Jesus remains active in the world.*

Did you know you have a role keeping Jesus active in the world? It's okay if you didn't. The first people to receive this mission didn't get it right away. They didn't understand what their mission was or how to achieve it. It took them a while to wake up to the fact that there was someplace else they were meant to be; something new they were called to do; something so big and so out there they couldn't imagine it. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever been led to go places or do things you never would have imagined? Think about it; who or what guided you?

Can you remember being led to take a step in life you weren't so sure about? A job you didn't know you'd like? A class you really didn't want to take? A new home you felt forced to move into when your real home became too much to handle? How did it go when you got there? Did you find a way to make a difference; the ability to take the next step and then some? Have you ever been stretched beyond yourself only to find that you're more capable than you thought; that God is more faithful than you could have imagined?

That's what happened to the earliest disciples. Sitting there staring up into the sky waiting for Jesus to return, they were suddenly led to another place, redirected. Instead of being in charge of some here-today-gone-tomorrow political or military campaign to restore the kingdom to Israel, the disciples found themselves at the earliest stages of a rag-tag movement – the Jesus movement – this otherworldly, can't-be-pinned down, unstoppable, ends-of-the-earth movement.

And that's where we find ourselves, too, if we're actually following Jesus. As followers of Jesus, we find ourselves in the middle of a movement. *And it's through us, that Jesus is leading this movement*, wherever it may take us. The only thing we can tell for sure about the Jesus movement is that it's beyond our wildest imaginations; that it will come in its own time and at its own pace; that it can show up any place on earth – and be just as valid as if it were in our own backyard – AND, most importantly, that we have a role to play.

Our job is to follow the Holy Spirit and to share our faith with others. Without us being engaged as active disciples, without us the Jesus movement goes nowhere. We might as well be standing here passively looking into the heavens, just waiting around for Jesus to come back and do it all for us. But to do that is to throw in with some earth-bound Jesus, not the Jesus who God has lifted up. As disciples of Jesus Christ, our job is to share our faith in such a way that others are inspired to follow Jesus to new places in their lives – to be disciples of Christ – to share a common faith beyond all limits, to the ends of the earth.

Can you think of a way to do that, to get to that place in your life? And if not, can you think of someone who might show you the way? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, we give thanks that you reveal yourself in the words of Scripture, read and proclaimed among us. We are grateful that you make yourself known in bread and the fruit of the vine.

We thank you for all those people in our lives who have led us to the gift of new life through our faith in you – for those who have let us trust their faith when ours was full of doubts; for those who have been a beacon of hope when we were hopeless.

Thank you for the witness of your disciples – those people you bring into our lives who support and challenge us to be better followers of Jesus – whether they be our parents or grandparent, a teacher, our best friend, or whoever they are and however they come to us. You know them, Lord, those who come to our minds in the midst of this prayer.

Help us to likewise lead others in the faith. Help us live lives that overflow with a love that reaches into the lives of the lonely. Give us such peace as to calm those who are troubled. Assure us of your abundance, that those who are wanting may receive. Guide us in such a way that those who are lost may be found.

For our greatest joy is to experience your presence and to respond to you, and we do this humbly today, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.