

## “Smooth Air”

By Rev. David E. Gray  
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7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
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Ascension  
Acts 1: 1-11; Matthew 28: 16-20

What is the most valuable thing you’ve ever left behind?

A week ago Monday, violinist Philippe Quint left a Stradivarius violin worth \$4 million in a Newark taxi cab. Now that is a quite a tip.

Driver Mohamed Khalil picked up Quint late Monday evening and drove him from the Newark airport to Quint’s home in Manhattan. When Khalil dropped him off, both men were unaware that the irreplaceable violin was still in the cab.

Quint was frantic when the taxi drove away. “I just collapsed right there on the ground,” he said. “I was just beside myself.” Quint spent the next few days looking through photographs of taxis at the Newark Taxi Commission, which helped him get the word out about the missing violin.

Khalil had found the violin in his cab and by last Thursday had arranged to meet Quint back at the place where they met originally - the Newark airport. Quint opened up his violin case and “sat on the floor and cried” when what was lost was returned.

We all have experienced times of separation from something or someone we value, whether it’s leaving our briefcase on the metro, kissing a loved goodbye as they head overseas or dropping a child off for school or college.

As the season of Easter begins to draw to a close, we read this morning about Jesus' Ascension and the separation his disciples experienced when Jesus was taken up in the clouds and returned to Heaven after 40 post-resurrection days with his disciples.

The disciples were in shock. They were not expecting it. They stood and stared at the sky in disbelief. Suddenly two angels came to them with a message – a message that God is not about to leave us behind.

Let's hear that message through our second lesson from the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.

Imagine the sense of separation the disciples experienced around Jesus' Ascension. They had gotten through the emotional rollercoaster of Jesus' death and resurrection and had expectations that Jesus would soon restore the glory of the kingdom of Israel, and here Jesus was taken suddenly up into the clouds to Heaven. They no doubt felt as hollow as Philippe Quint did.

Two messengers from Heaven, two angels, tried to provide a measure of reassurance. They 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."

On first read, it would seem that what the angels meant by Jesus coming in the same way is that he'll just retrace his steps, follow the same path back and reappear someday through the same clouds, in the same spot with the same type of light around as he left. If that were the case, then the disciples were doing exactly the right thing in staring up at the sky waiting for Jesus to return. If what the angels meant by "the same way" was

that Jesus would retrace his steps, they should be waiting for him there. In fact, we should be gazing too so we can see him as he starts coming back down.

In the pre-modern times, it was thought that Heaven was just a few miles above earth through the clouds. People then thought Jesus was ascending to around cloud level. But for modern Christians, with our knowledge of space travel, the ascension raises troubling questions. Where exactly did Jesus go? Could he have survived going into the atmosphere without a spacesuit? How many galaxies did he have to go through to get to Heaven? How does our modern view of what ascending into the sky means jive the angels' focus on Jesus returning the same way he left?

Later this month, NASA will launch the space shuttle Discovery into space with a team of Japanese and American scientists headed to the International Space Station. I got to spend some time with one of Discovery's pilots, Mark Kelly, at a conference over New Years. Kelly explained that the innovation of the space shuttle was that it could return from space in the same way that it left. Before 1981, space craft were expendable. You might remember from movies like *Apollo 13* that spaceships were launched from, say, Kennedy Space Center and then landed in the Pacific Ocean. But the space shuttles are reusable. They can take off and land in similar way and at the same location.

If what the angels meant was that Jesus would ascend up into space and come back down in the same way to the same place, it would make sense for the disciples to be like the people who gather at Cape Canaveral and stare into space awaiting the return of those who had flown into the heavens.

But that is not the message of the angels. They used a disapproving tone when they asked the disciples why they were staring up at the Heavens - suggesting that the

verdict from Heaven is that the disciples should stop staring. When the angels said that Jesus will come back in the same “way,” the word for “way” they used is the Greek word *tropos* – which translates literally as the “same character or quality,” not look, location or landing pattern.

The character of Jesus’ Ascension to the disciples was that it was sudden and unexpected. As Eugene Peterson puts it, Jesus ascends mysteriously and will return mysteriously. This interpretation is punctuated by the first part of our lesson from Acts when the disciples ask Jesus if the time was coming when he would restore the kingdom to Israel, and Jesus responded that we do not know the times of God’s authority.

I think of the story of the man talking to God to try and understand God’s timing. He asks, "God, how long is a million years to you?"

God replies, "To me, it's about a minute."

Then the man asks, "God, how much is a million dollars to you?"

God says: "To me it's just a penny."

So the man asks: "God, may I have a penny?"

God answers, "Just a minute."

What the heavenly messengers are implying is that we do ourselves no favors being idle about the future, staring at the sky, waiting for things to happen.

When we proclaim in the Apostles Creed that Jesus ascended into Heaven, sitteth on the right hand of God the father and will come to judge the quick and the dead, we

confess with confidence that God is in control of the future. That should empower us, rather than immobilize us.

Our optimism about the future made possible through Jesus Christ allows us to turn our attention to our work here so we can prepare and plan for the future.

This is the spirit of Wills Emphasis Sunday. God has a future for us and for his church and that future requires our involvement, preparation and care. A million years may be a minute to God, but our time here is limited. We should make use of it.

What gives us hope as we remember the Ascension is Jesus returning in flesh and in spirit. In Acts 1, the angels tell the disciples, “This Jesus” will come again. They don’t just say, Jesus will come again. Our New Revised Standard Version makes the point that “this” Jesus has been taken up to Heaven. Moreover, the NIV, New King James and other versions of the Bible translate the Greek as saying, “this same Jesus” will come again - making the point even stronger. The angels are making clear that the Jesus the disciples knew in flesh, the one for whom Thomas had asked to see the holes in his hands to prove he wasn’t just spirit, will return. Luke is writing in Acts that the angels provide assurance that it is not some new person that will come back, but the same Jesus who the disciples knew in flesh. The same Jesus who took the pain of the world on his shoulders will come back. The same Jesus who died on the cross will return in glory to restore the kingdom. The same Jesus who promised to be with his people always is the one who ascended.

If Jesus has ascended to Heaven, what do we do with our first lesson? Matthew ends his gospel with the words that we use to begin our sacrament of baptism – the Great

Commission. Jesus says, “go and make disciples of all nations.....and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Jesus promised to be with his people always, and yet at the Ascension leaves them behind and returns home? How can this be?

Jesus left in an unexpected way and he returns to us in a way the disciples did not expect – through the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus’ response to the disciples’ question in Acts 1, Jesus tells them “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” As Luke writes in Acts 1, “(Jesus) gives instructions through the Holy Spirit.”

In the Ascension, Jesus previews the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost bringing the presence of God in Christ to the people everywhere.

Jesus’ followers are to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, empowered by the Holy Spirit. We engage in mission projects as this church did last Saturday because we are not called to stare at our navels or stare at the sky but we are commissioned to spread the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed throughout the world.

Jesus’ Ascension into Heaven is a critical part of God’s plan for us. The one who suffered on earth in every way that we did is sitting at God’s right hand to share our pain and to advocate for us. If Jesus were on earth in one spot in the Middle East still, we’d all be trying to move to Jerusalem to see him. After the Ascension, through the Holy Spirit we have the ability to experience Jesus’ presence wherever we go. Jesus’

returning to Heaven makes clear Jesus' divinity. He came from Heaven and ascends there to complete the work of the resurrection.

And yet the angels make clear that Jesus does not leave us behind. We are not abandoned in our taxi cab of life, separated from the only master who can make beautiful music out of our lives. Each of us is irreplaceable to God - we are all unique and of value to God. So from Heaven Jesus seeks to find us when we are lost. God sends the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide us. And Heaven holds a place for us too someday.

There is a story of a boy who liked to fly a kite. He was so successful that the kite went up into the clouds and out of sight. The boy stood there, holding the rope in his hand and another boy asked him how he knew the kite was still there. The boy with the kite told his friend to put his hand on the string. He did. He couldn't see the kite in the clouds, but he could feel the pull of the unseen kite.

Knowing God in Christ is to feel the pull of the invisible power of the Holy Spirit. The tug in our hearts lets us know that Jesus is there above and is present in our midst today. And that knowledge can lift our spirits up where they belong.

Thanks be to God. Amen.