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“Out of Reach”

Part I of the Sermon Series, “Catching Up With the Spirit.”

Acts 1:1-14

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In the first book, Theophilus, (the book of Acts) I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “**This,**” he said, “**is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.**”

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “**Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?**” ⁷ He replied, “**It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power 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.**” ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ 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.**”

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son



of James. ¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

I remember losing my red balloon. Most children have the same experience, but it made enough of an impression on me for the memory to stick. The helium filled balloon was given to me as a parting gift. I can't remember where—maybe the mall... church event... a birthday party. What I do remember is managing to get it in my mom's car and getting it home. When we got home, Mom went inside while I remained in the yard outside holding hands with my new red friend. We played catch. I ran around the yard with the balloon trailing behind me. When I stopped, it caught up, but then would rise to the air pretending it had not been chasing me. I walked around the yard with my arm around my new buddy's one shoulder.

Then, I got adventuresome. I put the balloon under my hand and kept it there. I bounced it down and it came right back up. I stood there and dribbled in place.

- Then I found I could dribble while moving around the yard.
- Then I found I could dribble around my back and between my legs.
- Then I found I could commit a *turnover*.

The balloon slipped past my hand, the string slipping through my fingers when I tried to grab it. A center court jump didn't work. I wasn't ready to let it let the balloon go, but up and away it went.

My disappointment, though, turned to fascination as I watched the red balloon lift away. How high—how far—would it go? Full of energy though I normally was, I remained motionless for many minutes watching my friend show the courage and sense of adventure that I possessed only in my fantasies. I remained standing until the tiny red dot disappeared. I knew it would land, but somewhere else... not here.

That memory could be, for many, a parable of Jesus' ascension into heaven. As far as a surface reading of the story, it is. But as for a theological reading of the story, it is not.

The problem is that the surface story is so fun and vivid, it is hard not to get stuck. The question, "[Did Jesus really go straight up in the sky?](#)" leads us down the wrong path whether or not your answer is "Yes" or "No." The debate about why someone standing on a round earth that itself revolves around a star would have to rise up to get to heaven, as if Heaven has a zip code above the clouds, is a debate that takes time and yields nothing of what Luke is trying to offer. I do not think, half a century after the fact, that the author of Acts is trying to make the point that "[it really did happen just like that.](#)" The author has theology to teach here, and he is doing it through story. This is narrative theology.

Now, to get to the theology, you have to know the narrative. So, let's review the story, the surface telling of which my escaped red balloon is something of a parable.

To set it up, we have just returned from Intermission. I am thinking of the Gospel of Luke as Act I and the Acts of the Apostles as Act II since they were written by the same person. I'll name the Author as "Luke" from now on.



Our story introduces Act II. That means there are going to be themes raised here that will be carried forward throughout the rest of the story of the early church. In Act I, the Gospel of Luke, we watched all that Jesus said and did, and how he grew close to his disciples. Then at the end of Act I, there was the terrible crucifixion followed by the shocking miracle of the resurrection. Jesus, released from the grave, reunited with his disciples in a room in Jerusalem.

In the first few verses of our passage, the introduction to Act II, we have the sort of recap moment we often see on TV. “Previously on Luke’s story...” We are reminded of Luke’s Gospel, including the crucifixion and resurrection, and are told that Jesus and the disciples spend 40 gift days together... 40 more glorious days with the master they love and thought they had lost.

They then take a Sabbath day’s journey out from the city. They climb Mt. Olivet together until there is no place to go but back down. And when the disciples go back down, they want to take Jesus with them. He is within their grasp and they do not want to let him go. They have more questions to ask, like when will Jerusalem be restored to its former glory with all the political and economic power it once had.

But Jesus does not go down, he goes up. Jesus gives them some more instructions that they then learn are his parting words. He then rises above them. How high—how far—will he go? How long will the disciples be able to watch until he becomes a dot that disappears in the clouds? They won’t be able to see where he lands, but they know it will be in another world... not here. Heaven itself.

And then two white-robed men—angels?—appear to them. They ask, “[Why are you looking up? Go home to Jerusalem. Jesus will return just as you saw him leave.](#)”

That is what they do. They go down the mountain and return home. There in that upper room they wait

for the Spirit to come,
as Jesus promised,
or Jesus to come
as the men in white promised.

They return home where they and their community of followers, men and women alike, wait and pray together.

Up/Down. Leave/Return. These are directions used in the story. But are the details of geography Luke’s greatest concern?

Maybe if Luke had been there—maybe if he had been an eyewitness—maybe if he writes this story as soon as he gets back home and can find quill and papyrus—maybe his priority would be to quickly write down everything he saw before he could forget it. Such a story, I imagine, would have at least the tone of the tried-and-true-southern way to begin a story, “[Y’all are not gonna believe this!](#)”

And who knows, maybe it happened just the way Luke wrote it happened. Even this being around a half century after the fact—even with most, if not all, of the disciples and eyewitnesses gone—maybe the stories were passed down in such a way that Luke got it just right. Maybe Jesus



departed from the disciples in the only way human beings can see it and understand it. If God is going to show us something, after all, we can only see what we are able to see.

I don't know, I wasn't there. What I am certain about is this: In writing his sequel to his Gospel, Luke's priority isn't telling people what happened. His priority is telling others *the meaning of what happened*. When he crafted his two books, he had all these stories and accounts about Jesus and the early church in front of him and he was careful in

- how he picked and chose what he would tell,
- how he ordered the stories,
- and how he told them so that he could offer
 - a witness to the good news of Jesus Christ
 - and the good news of Jesus working in and through the church.

His books, founded in a real life and real happenings, are literary masterpieces.

Having the whole of Act II in mind, he tells the story of our passage in a way that will set the direction of the rest of the book of Acts. He raises themes that will be carried all the way through to the end of the story of the early church.

Keeping in mind that we are reading a literary masterpiece, I want you to consider a common literary technique that I think is the key to understanding the meaning of the story. It is the literary use of irony. We see irony used in three well known movies:

- In *The Wizard of Oz* as the characters ask for things they already have within themselves. The wizard gives them objects—
 - the scarecrow a diploma,
 - the lion a metal,
 - the tin man a heart pin—
 - surface items anyone can see,but the real intelligence, courage, and love are hidden within the three.
- In the play *No Exit*, three characters try to work together to escape Hell... until they realize that Hell is each other.
- And, in *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey, yearning to find a better life elsewhere, learns that his greatest life is home with his family and community.

Our passage tells of Jesus rising to heaven. But the whole rest of Acts is about Jesus living and moving here on earth. Yes, body gone, but yes also, Spirit present. So, here at the beginning, it is not so much that Jesus is going up, but that Jesus is going everywhere.

That Jesus is everywhere means that Jesus does not belong to Israel, or any one nation. The earliest audience for this story couldn't miss this message and neither should we. For look at what the disciples ask Jesus before he leaves: “[Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?](#)” Yes, they want Israel to be a just and holy nation, but this is also a question about political and economic power.



That is clear with Jesus' answer. He says that they will receive power, but it will be the power of the Holy Spirit. And while this power will first come to them in Jerusalem, the Spirit will eventually propel them

- beyond the capital city into all of Judah,
- and then into neighboring Samaria,
- and then to the ends of the earth.

And it is precisely then that Jesus rises from them as if to demonstrate that he is not, nor ever will be, in their grasp, or in the grasp of any nation or agenda. The Spirit of Jesus will return and work wonders and if they want to be with that Spirit, they will want to keep up.

“Keeping up,” is what the followers of Jesus are going to have to do the rest of the Book of Acts. You could call the *Acts of the Apostles* the “2020 chapter of church history” because it is the story of the church having to adapt and reinvent itself over and over again in order to keep up with Jesus' Spirit as it moves exactly as Jesus told the disciples it would.

First, Jerusalem. The Spirit comes powerfully to the Upper Room where Jesus' followers are gathered. The Spirit excites their hearts, loosens their tongues, and drives them into the streets to lead massive demonstrations giving witness to the better way of God's love.

Then, in chapter 8, Phillip becomes the primary witness as the Holy Spirit moves through him to preach and work wonders in Judea and Samaria.

Then in chapter 9, Saul has his conversion experience and moves from being the Persecutor of Christians to becoming the Emissary of Christ. The rest of the book tells of his journeys to the ends of the earth—what is known of it anyway—even to Rome, the capital of the Empire from which Israel would love to be freed.

And so, as we make the journey through the *Acts of the Apostles*, watching followers scramble to keep up with the Holy Spirit, and having to adapt attitudes and practices to do so, our hope is that we can learn fresh and powerful truths about being the church that tries to keep up with the Holy Spirit in our day.

Maybe we can hear this story in a unique way. After all, we have had an Ascension of sorts imposed on us. Our congregation has largely been lifted from its church facilities and has been carrying on its life largely outside the walls of the church facilities. Maybe we can think freshly about what our return to these facilities will be like. In the meantime, maybe we can think freshly about what it means to be the church beyond the walls:

- in the neighborhoods around us, including ministries like the PCC, Ram House, Family Promise and Habitat; being engaged in community efforts,
- then beyond these walls to the nation,
- and then beyond our nation's borders to the Dominican Republic and to the ends of the earth, which includes all nations that are contending for the kind of power the disciples first asked to return to Jerusalem.



And maybe, because we are a congregation that has been largely lifted from our church facilities and are waiting, if not for Jesus, at least for ourselves to return to a central place, we can hear this story of a blessing of our witness right here in our Jerusalem. By following the Holy Spirit, maybe we can witness to the greater way of justice, peace and reconciliation which are reflective of God's Kingdom... a kingdom not really up there, but anywhere where God's Spirit is at work.

