

# Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?

Hespeler, May 21, 2023 – Ascension Sunday

Acts 1:1-14, Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35, 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11, John 17:1-11

On October 14, 2012, Austrian skydiver Felix Baumgartner got into a helium balloon and flew straight up into and beyond the atmosphere. He climbed 39 kilometres (or 24 miles) into the stratosphere. The blue sky turned black and the stars came out. He was wearing a specially designed pressure suit, of course, or he would have been dead before long.

Watch the YouTube video of the jump here: <https://youtu.be/E9oKEJ1pXPw>

He stood there at the door of his capsule and looked down. The curve of the earth's globe was plainly visible beneath him. He leaned forward and then he just fell. Well, he didn't just fall; he hurdled to earth in free fall. He fell for 4 minutes and 19 seconds before eventually deploying his parachute. During that time the black sky turned blue, the whole earth spun, and he moved so fast that he is the first and only human being to ever break the sound barrier without an engine.

## A Stunning Event

The whole event was absolutely stunning and awe inspiring. All over the world, people watched the video of the feat in shocked amazement. And if you had been present in New Mexico, where the whole event played out, you would have stood there staring into the sky. Your eyes would have widened in shock when you heard the sonic boom and realized that a man had just made that. You would have been filled with wonder and relief to see the man land safely.

I could not help but think about that incredible stunt that took place over a decade ago when I read our passage this morning from the Book of Acts. **“When [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”** The connection between the two events seems inescapable. Jesus takes exactly the same route as Felix Baumgartner, just in the opposite direction.

## An Amazed Reaction

Even more important than that, the reaction is much the same. While he was going, the disciples were gazing up toward heaven. And they are clearly so amazed and shocked by what they are seeing that they barely even noticed the sudden appearance of two men in white robes. These men, who appear to be angels, then criticise them for staring up so fixedly saying, **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”**

There is so much that connects these two stories. They both follow the same route. They are both extremely awe inspiring. But, in many

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ways, when you look at the question of what these two events mean, they really couldn't be more different.

## What it means?

Baumgartner's jump was many things. It was a publicity stunt engineered to promote the Red Bull brand. It was a successful attempt to set a world record. But it was, above all, a scientific experiment. And, as such, it confirmed many of the things that we know about our planet. It dramatically demonstrated the shape of our planet and the form and substance of the atmosphere and stratosphere.

But if the story of the ascension of Jesus into heaven means anything – and it obviously means a great deal – that meaning seems to depend on a denial of just about everything that has been demonstrated by Baumgartner's jump. Because, if all that Jesus did was to rise up from the earth in order to enter into the stratosphere – if all he did was travel upwards until the blue sky turned black, the stars came out and the oxygen ran out – that would have been amazing. But it would have had none of the meaning that it is meant to have in this passage in the Book of Acts.

## How they saw the Universe

The meaning of this story is entirely dependant on a first century understanding of the universe. The disciples of Jesus lived in a world that they conceived of as a layer cake. There were three basic levels of their universe, and the meaning of those levels was more spiritual than it was physical. The earth was sandwiched between an underworld below – a place of death and possible damnation – and heaven above. Heaven was where God lived, and it was just beyond the clouds and on the other side of what looked like the blue dome of the sky.

And the meaning of Jesus' ascension is all found in the spiritual shape of the universe. This story is about Jesus departing from a physical presence with his disciples to take his place at the right hand of the Father so that he can watch over and intercede for his beloved followers on the earth.

## A Theological Idea

Now, as a theological idea, I have no problem with that. The amazing story of the gospel is that God so loved this world that he gave his only begotten son to live among us. What that means is that, in Christ, the very nature of God broke through into this world. Somehow Jesus was able to show us the true nature of God (that God is love).

In addition, Jesus brings humanity together with God so that God may understand all of our failings, temptations and weakness. And yes, it is only fitting that the risen Jesus must stand before God to plead for us and support our needs to the great ruler of the universe.

So as an idea, it is absolutely beautiful and wonderful. It means the world to me. But when you tell me that this had to be accomplished by Jesus doing a reverse Baumgartner, you kind of lose me there. Because I know that the universe doesn't work like that.

I know that if you go straight up, you do not somehow pass through a solid blue dome and find yourself standing in the physical presence of God in heaven. Astronauts have been up there. Felix Baumgartner has been up there we know that that is not how the universe works.

## Where is God?

That doesn't mean that God doesn't exist. It doesn't mean that heaven doesn't exist. Oh yes, they probably exist in a way that doesn't quite fit into the three-dimensional space that we're familiar with, but they still exist. But if I have to embrace the concept of the universe that was held by the first century disciples in order to accept the meaning of the story of the ascension, I have a problem. I know that, in order to take a place at the right hand of God, Jesus did not have to literally fly up into the stratosphere.

## Stories about what they had Experienced

Here, then, is how I have come to see all of this. As far as I'm concerned, there is no denying that the disciples and followers of Jesus experienced something extraordinary in this person. They experienced God in him in some truly irresistible ways. They tried to pass on the truth of what they had experienced to us by telling stories of his incarnation, his transfiguration and other extraordinary events.

After he had been crucified and died, they experienced him alive and with them again. They passed on the incredible news of what they had experienced with the stories that they told of his resurrection. And sometime after he had been raised, they experienced something that convinced them that he had moved on to another plane of existence from which he would intercede for them before the Father. They passed on the truth of this with their accounts of the ascension.

## The Challenge of the Ascension

But they had a challenge in telling the stories of the ascension. Stories of the incarnation were extraordinary of course, but at least they could relate them to things that they had already seen. They had all experienced things like conception and birth, and they knew that Jesus' birth had to be something like that, just more divine.

In the same way, they could talk about the miracle of the resurrection using terms that everyone could understand because everyone could at least imagine what it was like to see someone again after they had died. Yes, in the case of Jesus it was far more amazing than that, but it did relate to everyday life.

But they didn't have the words to describe an experience of Jesus taking this new place at the side of God. And so, they had to resort to doing the best that they could, describing it in terms of the three-layer universe as they understood it. And so, I don't think that we can know exactly what they saw and felt and knew on that day. The best that they could say was that it was like watching Jesus go up and into the stratosphere.

## What it Means Today

That all leaves us with the question of what we do with all of that, and what it means for the faith that we profess today. The thing that particularly strikes me about it today is the way that, in that moment – as they stand there staring into the sky – the disciples are given an incredible new insight into the relationship between themselves and God – an insight that they can only describe in terms of Jesus going up into the sky.

And we are all given such insights from time to time – moments when heaven and earth come together and it all makes sense. These are powerful moments. But they come with a temptation. Such visions can be so overwhelming that we stand there in awe of what we have seen. We are just so impressed with our own insight.

## Our Response to Insight

That is exactly what the disciples are doing in this passage, and it is exactly why the two men in white call them out. **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”** Yes, we have been shown the secrets of another existence. Yes, we can take comfort in knowing that Christ will intercede for us from the right hand of God. Yes, we know the hope that he will return some day and finally bring justice and equity to the whole world. But none of that is a reason to stand frozen in inaction.

The day of ascension is all about what Jesus has done and will do for us. But the point of it is not to stand there amazed by what we have seen. Jesus has already been clear about that when the disciples asked him, **“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”** He replied, **“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”**

In other words, he is saying that, even though God is going to do it, you can’t know when. Therefore, there is no point in standing around looking up to the place where God was thought to abide.

## What to do Instead

So what, then, were they to do instead of standing around and staring? Jesus had told them that too. **“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.”**

And I think it is very significant what they are asked to do instead of waiting around. They are told to be witnesses. It is not up to them to make it happen – that is up to God. But they can be witnesses – they can tell other people about what they have seen and experienced of God in Jesus Christ.

So, what you have experienced, the deep insights that God has given to you over the years, the sudden realization of God’s love and grace that have come to you, you can and should share them. They will be blessings to many others. But they are not an end in themselves, don’t become stuck staring at them and contemplating them. Expect more from God, and in your expectation be bold to share what you have experienced. That is how hope spreads. And that has to be what Ascension Sunday is about.