

Sermon for the Ascension of Our Lord, Thursday, 17.v.2007, 7:30 p.m.
Ev. Luth. Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Penna.
Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53
Holy Communion – Setting 2

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who
was and Who is to come! ✠Amen.

**While He was blessing them, He withdrew from them
and was carried up into heaven. – Luke 24:51**

Lutherans have understood for almost all of our history
that heaven is not 'up' or 'out there' or located in any
particular space but that heaven is a dimension, a plane
of existence in the peace and presence of God, after the
struggles of the Church Militant on earth. In this life
that *is* limited and defined by time or space, heaven is

the living place of the Church Triumphant in the unlimited majesty and presence of the Triune God. We learned this in our controversy with the Calvinists whose tidy minds just could not understand how the Risen Christ could be present at the right hand of the Father in glory *and* on each Altar in each Church on earth each time the Lord's Supper is celebrated according to Christ's institution and commandment. He is everywhere on earth and in heaven too because He is God, God *incarnate*, and because heaven is not a place in the same way Felton or New Bridgeville or the Brogue is a place, a somewhere that is not and cannot be somewhere else. And so, Lutheran theologians from Martin Chemnitz to Werner Elert to Paul Tillich (to Steven Thomas to Mark Jeske) have

been pointing out, where necessary, that heaven is not 'up' and that it is not the same as outer space. So, why does Saint Luke proclaim that 'He withdrew from them and was carried *up* into heaven,' that He went *up*, in other words, that He *ascended* to the Father?

It seems that the LORD gave the disciples a visual image so that they would get the point. What point was that? *Up* is a place we cannot go without climbing something, stepping on something or without hitching a ride on a flying machine. Though Archimedes may have had one of those on his drawing board, aircraft, machines that go *up* were in mighty short supply in the First Christian Century. The flight of birds and the dream of human flight which we know some were thinking about even then was

something *beyond* the grasp of humankind. So is God, to Whom the Psalmist *lifts up* his eyes as to the hills (Ps. 121), *enthroned in the heavens* beyond the skies (Ps. 123). It is not from the mountaintop, but *out of the depths* that the Psalmist calls to God in time of guilt and trouble (Ps. 130). The holy dwelling of God's presence seems inaccessible, like a holy mountain where the Psalmist asks, "LORD, *who* may dwell?" (Ps. 15). Who indeed? Paul Tillich's suggested image of God and the presence of God as the *ground* of our being, an image that takes the mind's eye *down* and inward, rather than *up*, is a Lutheran point that continues to be well taken in a world full of picture-thinking fundamentalists, but *up* is an image we can all more readily relate to when we think of Christ's

relationship to the Father and our relationship to Father and Son through the Holy Spirit Who comes 'down' to us to draw us 'up' to heaven. That much I will grant to Jerry Fallwell who, at this point, really is more of an expert on the subject than I.

Call me medieval and pre-Copernican, but thinking in terms of 'up,' of ascending to God in a life of aspiration for the 'higher' things of heaven is an image I like very much for at least two reasons. Reason No. 1 is that I love flight, the flight of birds and of aircraft and I am generally happy when observing or imagining such things. Under other life circumstances, I might have made a decent aviator, except for a short-term memory which has never functioned at 100%. Birds and insects don't have to

bother with this, but human aviators have to go through a very strict checklist each time before takeoff. If they get in a hurry and forget even one point on that list, their experience may be like that of the head of the German *Luftwaffe* just before WWII. General Wever, a cavalry officer who had taught himself to fly at age 40 and who liked to get as much practice in as possible by always flying himself in single-seater aircraft from appointment to appointment. One day the general must have been running behind in his schedule when his German sense of punctuality trumped his common sense as a pilot. He forgot to check his flaps, which fact resulted in both a very short flight and, according to some, a much shorter war in the long run. An aviator, in order to ascend, must make sure that all

hindrances to that end are dealt with before taxiing down the runway.

Another and more important reason I find it easy to relate to the 'up' aspect of this great Feast of the Church is pastoral, or, I should say, spiritual. Not many people are invited to read the heart and mind of another like an open book the way a pastor of the Church may be invited so to do by a member of that pastor's flock. I received such an invitation when I went back to visit the first congregation I had served as pastor. I learned that a member I had come to know well lay ill in the hospital. With the new pastor's permission, I visited her. That woman, the mother of one of my dearest friends to this day, had a reputation for toughness as a business woman on both sides of

the US/Canadian border. She was bright, well-educated and a lover of all aspects of learning, and as solid, tenacious and *loyal* in her Lutheran Christian faith as anyone has ever been. She greeted me with a smile I shall always remember. When I asked her how she felt, the smile broadened and she said, "Light! I feel *light!* There is nothing holding me down in this life. I am ready to go to my Savior now, or to walk with Him for as many days as His father wills." That walk would amount to nearly a decade more of life, but the freedom of her confident faith, her 'lightness' with no cares or encumbrances would carry her through that last chapter to her final joy 'on high,' if you will pardon me for saying it that way.

By contrast with that unfortunate air force general, this Christian soul had done her flight check thoroughly. The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes, the words of the Creed lived in kindness and nourished through the Word and Sacraments of Christ in communion with His Church--not rushing through any of the above but practicing, *practicing* her faith in all these respects--all of this enabled her to ascend without incident *through* this life *to* the Author of her freedom and His presence for ever. Her example, and that of so many are there for us to see and to follow, Christ ascending to the Father in the members of His Body the Church all around us throughout our lives. Let us take it to heart and lay

aside all that might encumber us on this Ascension Thursday 2007.

There is one American spiritual beloved by me at least that did not make it into our new super-hymnal, the *ELW*, nor was it included in that generic hymnal published in Indiana and so venerated by some here, *Hymns for Praise and Service*. Perhaps it was deemed too Southern. In any case, though there are several Paul Gerhardt hymns which could serve just as well to convey and celebrate the sense of this great festival of Our Lord's Ascension, I would like to close by reading this hymn. I won't ask you to sing it, though, if you know it, and you do break out in song, I believe we will be able to deal with that. It is known by a title taken from the refrain:

I'll Fly Away

I.

Some glad morning when this life is o'er,
I'll fly away.

To a home on God's celestial shore,
I'll fly away.

Refrain:

I'll fly away, O Glory, I'll fly away.
When I die, Hallelujah, bye and bye,
I'll fly away.

II.

When the shadows of this life have flown,
I'll fly away.

Like a bird thrown, driven by the storm,
I'll fly away.

Refrain

I'll fly away, O Glory, I'll fly away.
When I die, Hallelujah, bye and bye,
I'll fly away.

III.

Just a few more weary days and then,
I'll fly away.

To a land where joy shall never end,
I'll fly away.

Refrain

I'll fly away, O Glory, I'll fly away.
When I die, Hallelujah, bye and bye,
I'll fly away.

✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠Amen.

