

Lift Up Your Hearts, Pt. 4
He Went Up
Luke 24: 50-53; Philippians 3: 20-21

**First Presbyterian Church
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Bilbo Baggins lives quietly in Hobbiton, tending his garden and planning the next meal. One day a group of dwarves and a wizard named Gandalf crowd into his hobbit home enticing him to come on a journey with them. A dragon named Smaug has taken over the Lonely Mountain and all the wealth of the dwarves. Surprisingly, this home-loving, comfort seeking Hobbit sets off on the adventure there and back again. After many harrowing escapades, he returns a different hobbit, full of newfound courage, wisdom and wealth. He becomes the leading figure in his community. He has also brought back the one ring of power, and because he retrieved it, eventually all of Middle Earth will be saved.

Tolkien understood the classic story line of the hero. The hero starts out not as a hero but as an ordinary person in an ordinary place. Then something compels him to leave home on a quest. The great heroes like Ulysses or Gilgamesh or Sir Gawain go because they have greatness in their veins pulsing to send them from the ordinary into the extraordinary. Modern heroes are often reluctant to get started, like Bilbo. or Luke Skywalker. They can't believe they have been called to this quest and in the beginning they are quite unsure of themselves. Nevertheless, they end up venturing into new realms, fighting dragons and Darth Vaders and evil empires ruled by Siths or Nazi's or Nazgul. They conquer evil, then return home to bestow a boon upon the community they left. In some cases, they literally save the world, or as in today's Marvel comics, they save the whole universe.

People will write books and create movies retelling the hero story as long as the world spins. Because this story resides deep in our bones. We want our ordinary lives to matter. We want to save people, or have a hero come save us. We want to dispel some darkness, build some order out of chaos, rescue some darkness, secure some special knowledge and thereby make our lives matter to the world. Or, we want to see someone come and do that for us: we want to cheer on some heroes so we can be safe, peaceful, growthful and blessed.

We can read the story of Jesus as a hero's story. He was born in an obscure and insignificant village. Depending on how you look at it, his conception and birth were miraculous, foreshadowing his greatness. Or his conception and birth

were suspicious, making him a disgrace, the least likely to be a hero. But when he grew up, he followed the call to leave home. Finding power through his baptism, he immediately engaged evil in the wilderness. Defeating Satan's temptations, he returned to bless his nation with mighty works of healing and words of cheer. At the end of his life, he battled the forces of evil again, appearing to be defeated as he was hung on the cross. But he rose from the dead as the master of evil, death and sin. He returned to show himself to his disciples, giving the whole world hope for the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. That's the ultimate hero story, the one that truly saves us.

And that's usually the way we tell it. From the point of view of this world. The hero went out into the land of death, defeated it, and came back to bless our lives in this world with grace and hope. But actually that's not the whole story. And in fact, when we get the rest of the story, our entire perspective changes. Our hero only came back to us on earth for forty days. Then he left us. He ascended to heaven. He withdrew from our life in the world. What's the deal with that? Was his task so completed that he could fade away? Has he left us to work it out for ourselves now?

Sometimes when our custodian Shelton tells a story, he'll stop before the important part and say, "All right, pastor, watch this. Wait a second. Listen. Watch this." Ok, watch this. Most hero stories start out from ordinary places on earth. We tell the story like Jesus started out in plain old Nazareth. But that's not true. He started out in heaven. Ordinary life for the eternal Son of God was the glory of heaven. Regular life from eternity for God's Son had been the ecstatic communion with his Father in the Holy Spirit, creating and upholding all things. Heaven was normal for him. But the community of heaven was lacking something. There was a problem. The glory of the Triune God was tarnished by an injustice. His power was mocked by the rebellion on his world known as earth. The story actually starts in the heavenly realm, and the place to which the hero journeys to fight dark forces is our world. The battle he engages is to reshape the human heart. He's going to return with a treasure not to someplace on earth, but to his Father's house in heaven. The journey of the one true hero is from heaven to earth and back to heaven. The treasure he brings back to his Father is a redeemed people. The story starts out from heaven and returns to heaven. The prize he wins is not a gift to help us live more comfortably now. The prize is that he takes us with him to his Father's right hand.

Let's say this a bit more dramatically. The atonement was not complete on the cross. The atonement was not complete in the resurrection. Only the ascension

brings Christ's atoning work to conclusion. Hebrews 9: 12 tells us that Jesus "entered once for all into the holy places, by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption." Jesus had to take the sin offering into the real Holy of holies, into the presence of his Father. He had to present himself as the completed sacrifice to finish the job. The story begins and ends in heaven. And the blessing he bestows is to adorn the glory of his Father by presenting him with the great treasure of all the people who participate in his redemption. Jesus is heaven's hero, who redeems and rescues human beings from the darkness of the world so that we can be returned safely to the Father. He seats us with him in presence as the pearl of great price secured for his Father as the ultimate hero's gift.

Of course the story is still not concluded, is it? Because after all we are still here. We may be spiritually ascended with Jesus, but we are living here, and it's really hard to understand what it means to be seated with Christ now. The hero is going to be sent again from heaven. He's going to enact the Lordship he already established in his first journey. He's going to put down the rebellion forever and transform all of this earthly creation into a heavenly realm. He's going to bring the whole created cosmos into his Father's presence.

I know, this seems like crazy talk. But it's Biblical. And it's thrilling. How can we know this? How can we discover why it matters day to day for us? OK, watch this now. Jesus has already taken what we are into heaven. He's already made the down payment on the new heavens and the new earth. His pledge to us that all this will happen is the fact that he has retained his human body. It is now outfitted for an eternal life in heaven, but it is still a human body. Paul's words that we read from Philippians are so crucial here:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.

He will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. Do you hear it? He still has a body! It is glorious and suited for heaven. But it is a body, so human that Paul can say, "What Jesus has, we will have. An embodied heavenly life." He will do this, Paul says, "by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself." Jesus gives us a double pledge. His body in heaven is the pledge that we will become like him. His Spirit in our hearts is the pledge that this is already occurring. He is working in us even now to change our hearts, to sanctify our spirits, so that we can dwell in everlasting communion with the Father in Christ our Savior by the work of his Spirit whom he has given to us forever.

Here's another way to say all of this. In his ascension, Jesus says to us, "What you are is what I love. What I am is what you will be. I have staked my life on you. I love you so much that I will not leave off being what you are. Even as I am the Son of God, I am still a man, a man who lives for you. And all I have I will give to you. Even as I present you faultless before the throne, clothed in my righteousness and redeemed by my blood."

The last thing I'd like to say about Jesus' ascension involves our destiny. Before he became Pope Benedict, Joseph Ratzinger reflected on the significance in this scene, and I will paraphrase his thought. Jesus is the image of God on earth. But he is also the image of *man*, used here as a summary term for all men and women, boys and girls. Jesus is what humankind is supposed to be.

The devil and his powers want to tear down the image of God in man. When Pilate presented Jesus to the crowds, he had just had him scourged within an inch of his life. "Behold the man!" said Pilate. The destiny of Jesus looked in that moment like disgrace and pain and futility. The evil in the world loves to mock us with that image of Jesus and say, "Look, here is what man is good for. Here is man. Disfigured. Bloodied. His only crown is that of cruel thorns. He is good only for the discard heap."

Now think how often in our movies and stories this is the way humanity is portrayed. We look at image after image of man humiliated. Man in the gutter. Man searching and groping blindly for meaning, and finding only despair. Man acting like an animal. Man helpless before his lusts. Man violent and destroying. Materialists tell us we came from the primordial ooze. We are nothing but a speck in an indifferent universe. We are here as the result of blind forces. We matter no more than a rock or a pig. Everywhere humanity is portrayed as diminished and helpless and can only continue in self-destruction.

This is where the ascension is so important. Jesus is the one man who lived out perfectly the image of God in a human being. The final picture we have of Jesus is not the battered, rejected, disgraced Jesus. It is the triumphant, radiant Jesus ascending into heaven. "Behold the man" must be said not only before the crucifixion. It must be said at the ascension. Look, there is man, man as he was meant to be, going to communion with God. There is man, meant to reign in heaven and to judge angels. There is man restored in glory, the very image of the eternal God. So Benedict tells us that to truly understand what people are, you have to look not just where we came from and where we wallow and slop now, you have to consider where we can go in Christ. Our destiny in Jesus is man in

communion, man in glory and harmony, man in loving dominion over a flourishing earth, man restored to a glorious destiny. The ascension is the guarantee, the down payment on all God is going to do to restore his redeemed race. Behold the man! If we are in Christ, we are meant for heaven. We are bound for glory. Our destiny is not the gutter; it is the mansions of the high king where we will live as his sons and daughters (Joseph Ratzinger, *Images of Hope*, pp. 57-60).

Since we started with Tolkien, let's go back to him to close. There is a brief but heart breaking scene as Sam and Frodo trudge through the blasted and bleak land of Mordor. They have no assurance that they will achieve their quest and destroy the ring. Their strength is spent, their provisions nearly gone and the enemy is all about them. One night, lying exhausted on the rocky ground, Sam looked up into the darkness and saw a miraculous sight. Tolkien writes it this way,

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.

I think about this scene sometimes when I am despairing about our nation and our world. Amidst the glare of city lights, the stars yet shine through. I see Orion's belt as the great hunter of the constellation makes his winter way across the sky night after night. And I realize, "They can't touch this. They can't reach this. They can blow smog over it so I can't see it, but it's still there." I hear bird song in the morning. I see leaves returning to trees. I hear babies coo. The world is not yet as bad or as bleak as it could be. There is light and high beauty forever beyond the reach of evil.

Our destiny in Christ is upwards. Our hero has come to claim us for his homeland. He has staked his eternal existence on us, joining himself forever to our human flesh. He has sent his Spirit as a pledge in our hearts that he is preparing a place for us. Our destiny is not man degraded but man restored. Our future is not the gloomy cynicism or the resigned sensuality of nearly every movie made these days and nearly every song sung. Our destiny is goodness, truth and beauty. Behold the man. What Jesus is, we shall be. He has gone up to complete the atonement for our sins. He has gone up to present us before his Father, the ultimate prize and unsurpassable gift of love between them. My destiny in Christ is glory. My destiny in Christ is love. And that gives me

strength to journey on now. That gives me courage to forgive, to care, to love, and to hope. Behold the man. Where he is, you will be. What he is, you will be. No power can break that. No evil can touch that. Fare forward, beloved. Quest upward and reach outward to bring others with you. Amen.