

ISAAC NEWTON

Today's message rises from the story of Jesus' Ascension.

Palestine was under the influence of the Greek culture, called Hellenism. Ascending into heaven was a Hellenistic sign of divinity, and so this needed to be recorded and told, and it was--in three different parts of the New Testament. The primary presentation is today's text from Acts 1.

The followers of Jesus, including the 11 disciples were there for the send off. Instead of intimate and loving farewells, they asked Jesus, "So, when are you going to fulfill the Messiah expectation that we have for you? When are you going to restore Israel?"

They didn't get what it was all about, just as many today don't really get it.

Jesus must have rolled his eyes when he answered, "It's not for you to know. You don't get to know the future / how things play out."

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This is a strange exchange.

The followers wanted the assurance of how events will unfold.

This desire for certainty is much like the need for rules and laws.

"Tell what to do." "Tell me right from wrong, so we can satisfy God, and not worry."

Instead, of literal legalism, Jesus was more concerned about how to be,.....knowing that the inner passion / the soul affects actions.

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Even so, many Christians today analyze the Bible to find a verse to defend a position or for detailed rules on what to do.

It's truly amazing, considering Jesus didn't leave one word behind.

Jesus didn't write anything for posterity.

Jesus' legacy was NOT words,..... but the **way** / the way to live... and something else.

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Lots of people try to extend their stay on this planet by leaving words, as if words have a life of their own. A will is an example of words used to extend one's influence after death, for a brief period.

At the very least, the tombstone / headstone is all that tangibly remains for most people.

The words on the headstone are called an Epitaph, and there's some interesting ones out there.

Mr. John Yeast left the epitaph,

"Here lies Johnny Yeast. Pardon me for not rising."

Mel Blanc was the voice for Bugs Bunny and Porky Pig, and he's headstone reads, "That's all folks!"

Winston Churchill's is, "I am ready to meet my Maker.  
Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter."

And I read recently, that for \$10,000, your headstone could be a video screen that presents you saying whatever you want. It turns on when someone approaches it.  
So, your words beyond the grave could be you inviting someone to linger and hear what you value / your opinion..... or you could finally tell someone off without repercussions.  
Well, I suppose they could break the screen on the headstone.

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Words are powerful, but they are limited. They are missing the warmth of life and they can be ignored.

The best legacy to leave is Not words or money, but rather inspiration, grace and love,..... and that has to be implanted while still living.

That is exactly what Jesus did.

During his three year ministry, he shared his message and life, and something else. Jesus gave his very spirit.

His spirit was God's spirit. The Holy Spirit that empowered and enable Jesus, Jesus was releasing / giving that spirit to those who are open to receiving it. He gave his very essence.

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There is a fascinating up and down dynamic to this exchange.

As Jesus was ascending upward, he was releasing downward the Holy Spirit.....which would arrive at Pentecost.

The followers of Christ were down in sadness because Jesus was leaving, and they were also down below the ascending Christ.

In turn, Jesus was rising and releasing his Spirit down to them in order to lift them up / to empower and enable them,..... and so that they could sense his presence.

This linear up and down phenomenon is like the *first and the last*, and it is featured in many of Jesus' lessons and parables, such as the "first shall be last" or those who sit at the high place of honour will be laid low.

Even the resurrection / the risen Jesus follows Jesus being put down and killed.

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We understand this linear perspective that implies down is less desirable than up.

We use such phrases as: "up in the clouds", "mountain top experience", "feeling upbeat", and more money is a "raise", not just an increase.

Likewise, we can "feel down", ...be..."down on your luck" or "beaten down"... and we can reach a "low point", even "hit bottom."

We tend to view life in linear terms, and up is good, and down is not.
I think you grasp the "gravity" of this measuring perspective.

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And, this bring us to Grace..... and the reason for the sermon's title.

Or,.....was that a different Newton who wrote Amazing Grace?

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Just kidding, ...Isaac means laughter in Hebrew, and it's Isaac Newton I want to refer to.
You know,..... the guy with the Apple.

Isaac Newton lived from 1642 to 1727. In 1687 he published, "Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy".

~Sounds like a great read, doesn't it? ~

We, of course, are familiar with Isaac Newton as the guy who discovered gravity when he watched a apple fall out of tree.

"Discovery" is a bit of an overstatement. Gravity wasn't hiding, and anyone who threw a rock in the air only to see it return to earth... also discovered gravity,..... but merely didn't ask questions about it.

Newton, on the other hand, asked a lot of questions, including how gravity was affecting the moon.

Yet, interestingly, Newton was more interested in what was counter to gravity.
He realized gravity was a downward force, but he was more intrigued by the things that could defy gravity, such as centrifugal force, the rise of warm air and sound waves.

Newton wasn't consumed with the downward pull. He studied the big picture / the whole process.

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In the spiritual realm, I think we have a pretty good idea about the "forces" that pull us down. We tend to associate religion with "thou shall not" and the other warnings. We are aware of what brings us down. However, do we know how to rise up?

I often hear, "I want to grow spiritually" which seems to reveal a lack of awareness about what pulls us up.

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We only read two lectionary texts. Another, from First Peter, is printed in the bulletin.

The first part is a preparation for coming persecution, emphasizing the need for God's Spirit in order to get through the hard times.

The hardships and sorrows of life can bring us low.
They can overwhelm and weigh us down.

This passage continues into chapter 5 where it presents some insight on how to lighten the load that is keeping us down.

Verse 6 begins with "humble yourself" before God.

Humbling ourselves sounds like a downward movement,.... and maybe there is that aspect to it. Yet, ...I think it is more letting go of those things that we think we need to feel safe and secure.

When we hold onto expectations, a sense of entitlement and all that self-protective armour we will probably sink in life's ocean.

The passage then goes on to encourage us to "cast all our anxieties on God"because God cares. God wants to lighten our load, and fears and worry can be very, very heavy indeed.

So, I think the first step out upward is to be lighter,.....and laughter is a good indicator that we are lightening up.

Think "Isaac"--laughter.... when the gravity of life is taking a toll.

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Now,.....here is where physics gets weird,.....as weird as an heavy-than-air aeroplane defying gravity.

The Psalm text begins "Let God rise", it continues with examples of negative things disappearing, then flows into "lifting up" songs to God who rides upon the clouds.

After that, there is a bunch examples.....revealing how to soar in the clouds like God.

Listen to some of these:

God gives the desolate a home to live in.

God leads the prisoners to prosperity.

God provided for the needy, and protects the weak.

The way up to the clouds is by lifting others up.

This may mean reaching down, even going down to lift others up.

It's providing homes for the homeless.

It's providing for the needy and enabling the downtrodden to prosper.

And, it is protecting and empowering the weak.

This is not a trickle down flow.

God's way of soaring is lifting up.

It is going down to lift up....to be lifted up.

Jesus is God coming down to earth to show us how to live / how to lighten our load and how to rise up by lifting others up.

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I think we Mennonites get this concept as well as anyone else.

We value simple living, helping and serving others.

Yet, I wonder if we fully understand. ???

I wonder because we still struggle. We still feel weighted down, and desire to be more spiritual / to rise above the mundane and the dread.

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We do have some well defined patterns on how to do service / on how we help the needy and so on.

Each year, we go through our check list: MCC sale, community aid, and so forth. And, don't get me wrong, all that is good, **yet**.....it seems a bit limiting,... like a procedure manual.

And,.....when someone doesn't do it right or is different,..... then well they are frowned upon..... in other words.... put down..... and... that is a tell tale sign that all is not right.

The weight of expectation and legalism is showing.

Something is wrong if we are trying to lift some people up and at the same time putting others down.

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Jesus rose up by pouring out his all for others.

As Jesus ascended into heaven, he released / gave to others God's Spirit that was in him, so that the followers could do the same.

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The early Christians put all this stuff into words; **they** wrote it down, and from the beginning we Christians have tried to contain Jesus and limit the love of God into something we can control and define.

Yet,.....I have a feeling that soaring in the clouds begins with a laugh, and is followed with "I love and trust you God."

Sir Isaac Newton, ....an apple falling to the ground is boring and dull.

Planting a tree and helping it to rise up against gravity, now that is impressive!