Today is Ascension Sunday.

Today we hear again
the ancient Lucan accounts of Jesus -
post crucifixion, post resurrection -
standing in the midst of his friends,
raising his hands and rising
alive
into the heavens.
Countless pieces of art have been rendered
depicting the scene.
The Ascension story is a beautiful story,
but is nonsensical to our modern minds
when read and interpreted
as a historical story.

The Ascension Story, however, is not a historical story.
The story does not appear in the other gospels.
Mark ends his gospel with the empty tomb,
although resurrection appearance narratives have been added.
John tells of many ‘post-resurrection’ appearances,
but no ascent into the heavens.
Nor does Matthew mention this upward movement…

Although the story of Jesus’ ascension is unique
to Luke’s work in the gospel and in Acts,
the ascension in not unique.
Ascension stories are in fact popular
both in the biblical narrative and in the wider culture.
And in understood in the context of ascension narratives
our ascension story is not just a pleasant whimsy
but a powerful proclamation of faith.

Biblically, this story has two primary precedents,
the ascension of Enoch (Genesis 5:24)
and of Elijah (2 Kings 2:11).
Enoch was a very minor biblical character in the time of Noah
who walked with God, according the Genesis (Chapter 5),
then was (according to Hebrews 11) “transported”.
He was transported, says the story, he did not die.
This Enoch story,
most probably originating with the Babylonian tradition of Enmeduranki,
had become familiar during the time of the early church
when the Jewish community was under constant threat by Rome.
Enoch, who ascended alive,
could then return to save the people.
As such the Enoch story was a promise of hope.

This, of course, is the promise of Elijah’s ascent.
And each year at Passover,
a place is set for Elijah in hopes of his return.
Elijah, God’s mighty prophet who ascended in the whirlwind,
will come again.

In the stories of Enoch, Elijah, and Jesus
the ascension is a promise of God’s return to the people.
In many cultures,
ascension is a spiritual path open for us to travel.
The ancient book of Jewish mysticism, the Cabala,
in fact offers detailed advice on how one can experience “ascension”.
This spiritual discipline has parallels in most religious traditions.
And in African mythology this understanding of ascent
plays out in the belief that the spirits of the ancestors
are understood to be in flight.

In the tragic years of our American holocaust
when slavery held African-Americans in bondage
this mythology of the spirits in flight
became very important.
This understanding of flight together with
American Christian concepts of Jesus and Heaven
lead to songs like
“Steal Away” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”.
This genre of music and stories about flight had a double meaning.
1. To sing of flight was to remember a greater power…
life beyond what we see
power beyond what we have
hope beyond our limited experience.

2. Sometimes these songs were also used to convey messages about impending opportunities for escape. The language of flying became a common motif in the ‘code songs’ during our holocaust.

“Tar Beach” is a recent children’s book in this genre,
a beautiful story of one little girl’s ascension.
Faith Ringold writes and illustrates
this incredible semi-autobiographical story
of “Cassie Louise Lightfoot”,
a precocious 8 year old child
who considers the issues of race and class
as she reflects on her father’s underemployment.
She is not bound by the discrimination of this world
however
as she closes her eyes and lifts her arms
flying high above the disappointments and despair.
From the air
in flight
she rights the wrongs
and feeds the hungry.

What I find particularly compelling about this story
is that Cassie’s flight is, to be sure, escapism,
but it is so much more than that.
From her vantage in the sky she claims power.
In the sky she is connected with a higher power
and thereby empowered to live, once grounded, with more hope.
What I love about this story
is that Cassie Louis Lightfoot’s ascension
is not from so much as for.
Her escapades do not function to remove her; they function to empower her.
Ascension not ‘from’, but ‘for’.

As we hear again the story of Jesus’ ascension
in the context of the broader ascension tradition
I wonder if we understand Jesus’ ascension
as from or for?
Do we understand that Jesus’ ascension as from this earth?
Has Jesus left us for a far away land, oft’ called heaven,
where (after our deaths) we will join him?

While much of orthodox Christian history
has rested on an “other-worldly” definition of ascension,
I do not find this theology either
adequate for the day
nor a faithful conclusion from Luke’s narratives.

Luke’s narratives themselves
speak to his intended understanding of
Jesus’ ascension being for life in this world.

Luke is the one who offers Jesus first public speech
as reading the words of prophetic promise in Isaiah:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Luke is the one so consistent about our kingdom building and work with/for the poor.
Luke is the one who moves throughout the gospel towards Jerusalem,
and then, in Acts, from Jerusalem back into the world.

Luke is the one who offers the story of the early church,
offering hope that the message and the meaning would not be lost.

Luke does not offer the Ascension to place Jesus in some faraway context
but rather to bring the powers of the heavens to the work of the earth.

Some glad morning, you and I shall fly away.

But I pray, and indeed I believe,
that that morning is not so far away…
that our flight will connect us
like Cassie
with a high power
that we might live with greater integrity and faith today.
And have we not been gifted with dreams of flight?
Some of my favorite dreams are when I take flight –
captured in a traffic jam,
I simply lift my arms and move beyond the chaos.¹

In the movie “Secret of NIMN” there is a delightful lullaby
entitled “Flying Dreams” with the repeated refrain:

Love it seems
Made flying dreams
So hearts, could soar.

Lyrics to "Flying Dreams" Lullaby
(Written by Paul Williams, sung by Sally Stevens)

Dream by night
Wish by day
Love begins this way.

Loving starts
When open hearts
Touch, and stay.

Sleep for now
Dreaming's how
Lover's lives are planned.

Future songs
And flying dreams,
Hand, in hand.

Love it seems
Made flying dreams
So hearts, could soar.

Heaven sent
These wings were meant
To prove, once more.

That love is the key....

Love is the key.
You and I
Touch the sky
The eagle and the dove.

Nightingales
We keep our sails
Filled with love.

¹ There are many, many interpretations of flying dreams and some contradict others. They are metaphoric (sign of freedom), prophetic (omen of death), spiritual (journey to other realms) and cultural (for the Crow Indians: you are sick, but in Central Africa: you have good health). My favorite is that flying dreams are symbolic of the out-of-body experience.

http://members.aol.com/caseyflyer/flying/dreams10.html
Sometimes flying refers to fantasy, or new thoughts, ideas, or relates to the spiritual realm. (Dr. Winer)
And love it seems
Made flying dreams,
To bring you home to me....
(Instrumental section)
Love it seems
Made flying dreams
So hearts, could soar.
Heaven sent
These wings were meant
To prove, once more.
That love is the key....
Love is the key.
You and I
Touch the sky
The eagle and the dove.
Nightingales
We keep our sails
Filled with love.
Ever strong
Our future song,
To sing it must be free.

Ev'ry part
Is from the heart,
And love is still the key.
And love it seems
Made flying dreams
To bring you home
To me..