

**New Life Episcopal Church**  
**Uniontown, Ohio**



Otto Lilienthal: Archives Otto-Lilienthal-Museum/[www.lilienthal-museum.de](http://www.lilienthal-museum.de)

**A Sermon for the Ascension Sunday**  
**May 17, 2026**

**The Rev Barbara Bond**  
[Ascension Day – The Episcopal Church](#)

Acts 1:1-11

Buoyancy

“As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”  
(Acts 1:9)

Allow me to introduce to you a German aviator named Otto Lilienthal. Aviation is more the domain of my husband Norm, but since I spent ten years in Germany, I can claim that I am a big fan of this German aviator who predated the Wright Brothers by about a decade. While I was hunting around for a metaphor for Christ’s ascension into heaven, this aviator’s feat of buoyancy seemed like a natural association.

Otto was fascinated by the idea of humans flying, and he studied the flight of birds, especially cranes, for a while, figuring out how to apply their natural flight to something that would work for us humans. A gifted engineer, Otto designed gliders. He lived in one of the flatter places in Germany, namely Berlin, but he knew he had to have a higher place to launch his gliders, so he built a hill, about 45 feet high, then made a framework shaped like giant wings, with fabric stretched over it, strapped the whole thing on his back, and took off from the top of the hill, launching himself into the wind. There is an ancient photo of Otto in flight, in your bulletin. He flew his gliders for about 12 years until 1896, when his glider stalled and nose-dived. His final words supposedly were, “Sacrifices must be made.” The Tegel airport in Berlin, operational until 2020, was named for Otto Lilienthal in 1988.

I have used Otto’s flight patterns as metaphors for singing when I taught students how to ride their own air supply. I told them about Otto going to the top of the hill and gently riding the wind downhill. My students subsequently had no trouble singing descending musical passages.

In our passage from the book of Acts, Jesus is lifted up into heaven. The aviation term for airplanes taking off is “lift.” The air comes over the wings as an airplane gains speed and is launched into the heights of the air. I think of Otto’s experiments with air, of his catching the wind over his man-made wings, and his gliding flight. There is something ethereal about Otto’s gliding, and it helps me to imagine Jesus’ departure from his disciples and from the earth.

The Risen Christ had been around the earth for forty days when he departed, after telling his disciples that it was their turn to build the church. They stared slack-jawed in wonder as Jesus ascended into the clouds, and they wondered what to do. Two men in white, probably angels, brought them back down to earth by saying: Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come again in the same way as you saw him go to heaven.” This was a bit perplexing to the disciples until ten days later, on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon them in the form of a mighty wind! Then they truly did get busy with the work of God and the early church. The entire book of Acts, named the Acts of the Apostles, details their energy and actions.

We know that our faith can lift us up and help us rise above the challenges of our times. I am reminded of a story told by doctor to a group of chaplains in Boise, Idaho, about 30 years ago. The doctor was a man of deep faith. He was also an avid hiker who enjoyed the mountains around Boise. He described to us a big challenge he experienced, when he fell and broke his leg on such a hike. He was alone on that mountainside, unable to move. He was able to contact our hospital's LifeFlight crew and ask for a rescue. The helicopter crew duly arrived, lifted him from his predicament, and brought him to safety. The doctor described to us his moments alone with God while on the mountain, praying fervently. On a piece of paper, he wrote a bit of scripture that he found comforting, and he left it there, on the mountain, after he was rescued. He wrote words from Isaiah: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace." (Romans 10:15, Isaiah 52:7)