

“WHY DO YOU STAND LOOKING UP TOWARD HEAVEN?”

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

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Throughout the year, our calendars are marked with special celebration days – family events like birthdays and anniversaries, and national holidays like Memorial Day, which we just observed last Monday. However, Americans set aside a whole slew of days for special observances that you and I don’t even know about, some of which are unique or downright bizarre. For example, are you aware that today, June 2, is “National Bubba Day,” which honors anyone named or called Bubba? If you feel left out of that celebration, you can rejoice that today is also “National Rocky Road Day,” which is all about eating a particular flavor of ice cream – the kind that features nuts, mini-marshmallows, and chunks of semisweet chocolate. Your name may not be Bubba, but here on June 2 you can still be an honoree by indulging in a scoop of Rocky Road!

Among the celebration days on the Christian calendar, you and I are most familiar with occasions like Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and All Saints Day. Other special days are less well known and may be observed less frequently in our churches. Ascension Day is one of those obscure observances. Ascension Day occurs on the 40th day after Easter and is usually celebrated on the following Sunday, which we’re doing today. But typically, it doesn’t elicit much of a celebration. I’ve never heard a child squeal with excitement to his or her Sunday School teacher: “I just can’t wait for Ascension Day to come!” It might be tempting for us to put Ascension Day in the same category as Bubba Day or Rocky Road Day – as just another frivolous church observance. But this would be a mistake, because Jesus’ ascension into heaven is a milestone event in the story of his life and a critical turning point in the story of the movement he inaugurates.

All four of our New Testament Gospels bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus, but they differ in their accounts of what happens afterwards. Mark simply tells us that Jesus is raised from the dead, and his version of the story ends abruptly at this point. The other Gospels include details of Jesus’ appearances to the disciples after his resurrection. The Gospel of John adds another dimension to the Easter event, telling us that when Jesus is raised from the dead he is also “glorified” or “exalted” by God. But what does his moment of exaltation actually look like? Is it a coronation, a ticker-tape parade, a public press conference?

Of the four Gospel writers, only Luke gives us a detailed description of how Jesus is glorified and exalted. This Evangelist reports a specific event, altogether distinct from the resurrection. The account starts at the end of Luke’s Gospel and continues in the introduction to his second volume, the Book of Acts. It is a straightforward, graphic account of what happens on the fortieth day after Jesus is raised from the dead: he is taken up into heaven in a cloud, beyond the disciples’ sight.

Now let me venture a guess: one reason why Ascension Day is just a footnote on many church calendars is that the event it describes is so mysterious and mind-boggling. Skeptics hoot over the idea of Jesus defying gravity and floating up into heaven. This is the kind of thing

Hollywood can make happen on a sound stage using special effects, but is it really something Jesus is able to do? Church people like us may have questions about the ascension as well. If we had been standing there with our cellphone cameras that day, who knows what we would have actually seen and recorded?

But whatever happens, Luke is telling us something important about Jesus, and you and I would do well to suspend our skepticism so we don't miss it. I like the conclusion reached by one not-very-pious preacher who said, "All I can figure is that this story gets Jesus back home where he belongs, with his Father in heaven." Notice that Luke is also telling us something important about Jesus' relationship with his disciples. The one who is present with them in life, then absent from them in death, then present with them again after he is raised from death, is now absent from them again. It's only natural that Jesus' absence creates a sense of uncertainty and longing in the hearts of his followers, both then and now.

Luke reports that when Jesus disappears into a cloud, the disciples are awestruck, "gazing up toward heaven" (Acts 1:10). Their eyes are fixated upon the sky, trying to decipher what they've just seen and what it all means. In the next moment, two men in white robes – presumably angels – show up and say to them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (v. 11).

Now, the way I read it, these two men are taking the disciples to task for staring into the sky. But why should they be so critical? In the first place, where else would they expect the disciples to be looking? Jesus doesn't vanish into the deep blue sea; he vanishes into the wild blue yonder; of course they are looking up toward heaven! In the second place, the two men hold out the promise that Jesus will return to earth the same way he leaves it – in a cloud up in the sky. Wouldn't it make sense for the disciples to keep looking upward, hoping for Jesus to come back, sooner rather than later? And yet, the two men don't give the disciples any room for excuses. They ask, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

Friends, I confess that I've always been intrigued, even haunted, by that question; and at times I've wanted to pose this same question to some of my fellow disciples.

During my first summer break from college, I worked in a Vacation Bible School at my home church. On the final day of VBS, the children were herded into the chapel to hear an old Baptist preacher deliver an evangelistic sermon. At the conclusion, he offered an altar call, or what Baptists called an "invitation." He gave the children an opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. What I most remember is the way he worded the invitation: "If you would like to go to heaven, please come forward." I mean, who would refuse an invitation like that, especially when you consider the alternative?! The kids came streaming down the aisles – not really understanding what it means to follow Jesus, but wanting to assure themselves of a safe and secure place beyond the pearly gates!

For a lot of folks in previous generations, this was what "salvation" meant – being saved from the fires of hell and being rewarded with the glories of heaven. This was understood to be the primary goal of religion – to turn the eyes of believers away from this temporary, sinful world and direct their eyes upward toward a more permanent, perfect world. This was said to be the whole purpose of the Christian life – to get ready for the life to come, which was seen as the

only life that really mattered, rather than working to help God's kingdom come "on earth as it is in heaven."

Today, the church's preaching and teaching is not so other-worldly, and most Christians are less focused on their heavenly reward and more attuned to their earthly responsibility. And yet, some Christians still perpetuate the old mind-set by obsessing about the end-times – when and where and how Jesus will return victorious to the earth. Like most of us, these folks acknowledge that the future of our world is threatened by nuclear weapons, economic disparity, and climate change. But instead of trying to fix these problems, these people almost seem to welcome them. They see them as signs that Jesus is coming back soon to bring the curtain down on history. Instead of asking, "How can we make the world a better place?" they're asking, "When will God bring this awful world to a merciful end? Will it be tomorrow? Will it be January 1, 2020?"

I've quoted this line before, and I'll surely quote it again: "Some people who are so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly good." I want to ask these persons, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven when there is so much work to do here on earth?"

This is surely the concern of the two men who chastise Jesus' disciples after his ascension. His followers have already revealed their fascination with the future, their desire to predict or control coming events. Just before Jesus ascends into heaven, the disciples ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6). Do you hear it? They want to see a detailed calendar, a blueprint for the end-times. Jesus tells them, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that that Father has set by his own authority" (v. 7). But this doesn't satisfy their curiosity or cure their longing. Just after Jesus leaves them and goes back to his heavenly home, they are already looking for his return, still fixated on the future. And so, the two men instruct the disciples to stop gazing into heaven and instead be about the business at hand – which is to wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit's power; and then, having received that power, to continue Jesus' mission on earth.

Friends, has it ever occurred to us that we may be looking for Jesus in all the wrong places? You and I are prone to look back into the past – the good old days when Jesus walked the earth in plain sight, performing miracles and spouting words of divine wisdom. Or, we're inclined to look forward into the future – when Jesus returns in glory to clean up the mess we have made of creation and complete his project of redemption. Let's not miss what the two men in white robes are saying to the disciples and to us: "Don't waste your time clinging to the Jesus of the past or yearning for the Jesus of the future. Yes, Jesus is absent, but he is also present with you through the Spirit. The power you have felt when he was here you can experience even when is not here."

And so, if you and I are instructed not to stand gazing up toward heaven, where are we to look for Jesus? As it turns out, he has given us some clues. We can see Jesus in the forgotten, downtrodden people of the earth – in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. We can see Jesus in his body here on earth – the Church – yes, the imperfect, petty, squabbling community that nonetheless bears his name and is empowered by his Spirit. And above all, we can see Jesus in the bread and cup that he still offers as signs of his love and grace. You see, Holy Communion underscores the very point of Jesus' ascension. He is not confined by time and space; he is not trapped on the pages of history or hiding behind the gates of heaven.

Christ is with us here; Christ is with us now. At his table, Christ is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Why do we stand looking up toward heaven when heaven has come to earth? Let's don't miss it!