

May 28, 2017
“Why Do You Stand Looking Up?”
Acts 1:6-14

Introduction

Luke, the evangelist, authored two books in the New Testament, the gospel of Luke, which tells of the birth and mission of our Lord, and the Acts of the Apostles, which tells of the birth and mission of the church. In each of those books, Luke gives an account of the ascension of the Lord to heaven, which took place 40 days after his resurrection from the tomb on that first Easter Sunday. We have just followed along as Kathy read those accounts.

With these accounts there is a wonderful old legend that has been passed down through the church. It is not scripture; it is not authentic, just a legend about the arrival of Jesus at the pearly gates following his ascension through the clouds.

It seems the angelic host was gathered to welcome God’s Son home and celebrate his return after his incredible sojourn on earth. Everyone had questions and wanted to hear about his experience:

His birth in a stable and growing up in humble circumstances, his three years of teaching, preaching, and performing miracles. Then the unjust trial, the gruesome torture and crucifixion, and finally the conquest of humanity’s most feared enemy—death.

All for the sake of sharing the good news of a loving God who wants nothing but the best for creation.

And now Jesus was home, and everyone was jubilant.

Someone asked, “Lord, now that you are no longer physically on earth, who will continue to share the good news of God’s love?”

Jesus responded, “Well, there are eleven individuals who were close to me. I have given them the responsibility of sharing the word.”

“Wow, these eleven must be incredible people,” the angels said, “the best and the brightest that creation has to offer.”

“Actually no,” the Lord responds. “They are just average folks with ordinary abilities. Not the ‘best and the brightest by any means.’”

“But Lord, if these are only average people with ordinary abilities, how can you be sure that they will get the job done?”

“Well, to be honest,” the Lord answered, “I cannot be sure.”

“You cannot be sure? What if they fail to do the job? What is your backup plan?”

And Jesus replied, “I have no back-up plan. They are the plan.”⁽¹⁾

I

I wonder if, standing there, staring up into the clouds, the disciples had any idea that there was no back-up plan, that they were the plan.⁽²⁾ That if the world was to know about the love of God, it would be through them.

The ascension of Jesus from the mount called Olivet must have been a stunning spectacle. But more amazing than Jesus' departure was the unlikely lot with whom he left the mission.

They had started out catching fish, mending nets, collecting taxes—not training to be religious leaders. They misunderstood Jesus' parables. They fought over who was the greatest. They fell asleep while Jesus was praying. They denied Jesus in his last days.

They only fully understood his life and mission at the end when, as Luke says, Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” So humanly speaking, perhaps the disciples were not the best choice to advance the good news.⁽³⁾ But they were the ones Jesus called, the ones Jesus chose for his plan.

II

At his last meal with the disciples, just before his arrest and trial, Jesus told the disciples he would be leaving them, but they would be sustained by God's Holy Spirit. Now, standing on the mount, Jesus gives the same message again, instructions to wait in Jerusalem and, “In a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Do they understand this time? Not really. Hence the question, “Lord, is this the time you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

“It is not for you to know the times or period that the Father has set,” Jesus says. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses . . . all the way to the ends of the earth.”

But wait, Jesus, we need some clarity, a few more details. We have some questions, Jesus. Jesus? And Luke says, “He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.”

It always seems to work that way, does it not? The very moment we want Jesus to be most clear, most vivid to us, something obscures him. That is why, in some traditions, the Paschal candle that is lit on Easter day is extinguished on Ascension Day, reflecting the fact that things will not be so obvious now.⁽⁴⁾

Strange as it may seem, we can take comfort in that. The life of faith does not lend itself to easy answers, despite what some might want us to believe. We set about our work with clouded vision, just as the disciples did after Jesus' ascension.⁽⁵⁾

III

So the disciples were standing there looking up, when two men in white robes came beside them and said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring up into heaven. Did he not tell you to go?”

Here is our question for Ascension Sunday: Are we staring up into heaven when we ought to be going? Not that there is anything wrong with staring up into heaven. That is what we do here in worship. That is why this magnificent structure is built the way it is, to draw our eyes toward heaven.

But there comes a moment when it is time to leave this place and go into the world. There is work to be done out there.⁽⁶⁾

In Fort Benton, Montana, overlooking the Burlington Northern Railroad depot, there is a monument to a dog. It was erected by the townspeople to tell the story of a collie's love and fidelity.

In the summer of 1936, the dog's master died, and his body was shipped back East for burial. The dog watched as the casket was loaded on the train and then followed the train as long as he could, but he could not catch it. So he returned to the depot, dug a spot, and waited for his master to return.

The dog never left the station. Through all kinds of weather, year round, he met each train and scanned the passengers searching for his master. Then one January day in 1942, the dog was struck by a train and killed. The railroad personnel buried the dog on a hill above the depot and marked his grave with the monument.

The dog's loyalty was admirable and honorable. But here is the flip side: He spent the last six years of his life waiting. What if he had spent less time waiting and more time living, living as his master taught him? What if he had gone and found others to serve and help, instead of sitting in one spot waiting for his master's return?(7)

I think you get the point. Waiting is not our calling. Jesus tells us that we will be witnesses because the Holy Spirit will come upon us and empower us to be witnesses.(8)

We are an unlikely lot with whom Jesus has left this mission, just average people with ordinary abilities. But we are the ones Jesus has called. We are his plan.

Conclusion

They must have looked like abandoned, lost souls, those disciples left on the mountain that day. But keep reading in the Acts of the Apostles, and you will see what happens. When Jesus ascended, those unlikely disciples took ownership of the mission. The Spirit came upon them, they consented to become the church, and nothing was ever the same.

You see, there is Easter, and there is Pentecost. And the transition between the two is Ascension. Ascension places the mission begun by Jesus in our hands with a promise: We will be empowered by Holy Spirit. And we become the plan for sharing God's love on earth.

So we had better not stand looking into the sky too long.
Pentecost is coming.

God, empower us with your Spirit to share your love. Amen.

Notes

1. David E. Leininger. Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc. *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit*, series VI, cycle A, p. 94.
2. Ibid, p. 95.
3. *Homiletics*, May-June 2011, Vol 23, No. 3, "Abandonment? No Way!" p. 44.
4. *Tales for the Pulpit*, VI, A, p. 95.

5. Ibid.
6. David Peterson, "Built to Last: Universal Application," sermon preached at Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church, Houston, TX, January 16, 2005.
7. Gregory L. Toller. Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc. *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit*, series V, cycle C, p. 99-100.
8. Ibid, p.100.