

WHY ARE YOU STANDING LOOKING TO HEAVEN?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23

There is good news and there is bad news today. The story of the Ascension in the book Acts bears both.

The bad news is Jesus is no longer among us bodily on earth. He has ascended to heaven, as we say in the creed, where he sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead; which is all well and good in the great by and by, but for now he is gone from our sight.

The good news is that God is still with us in Spirit and in truth, even as we look to next Sunday when we celebrate Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit to the early church, the continuation of God's presence, comfort, and power among us.

But the story of the Ascension is an odd story, because unlike miracles that happen when people are healed, the lame walk, the blind have their sight restored, the dead are raised, which seem to have practical implications for our own life; here is a miracle that is all about God and really doesn't heal anyone, or call anyone back to life, or restore any losses. It's just a beautiful, wonderful, inspiring thing that's all about God, and not something that is promised for us, in spite of many people's ridiculous fascination with the Rapture and the body snatching that is so captivating to so many readers of the Left Behind series of books.

The story starts out with a question from the disciples who ask the risen Lord, whether he is now going to restore the political power of the Davidic monarchy. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" In short, they still didn't get it.

After all they had experienced, all that time traveling with Jesus, hearing his message, his constant denials that his kingdom was not of this world, his death at the hands of the Roman authorities, his astounding resurrection, his appearances to them afterward at which he made himself known in the breaking of bread... all of that notwithstanding, the disciples were still wondering when they would receive their cabinet appointments in the new Israel that they believed Jesus had come to found as the new David, the messiah.

And you know, if I had been Jesus I probably would have thrown up my hands at that point and asked "What is it going to take for you guys to wake up and smell the coffee?" It's over. I'm not that kind of Messiah! And you are not going to be in charge. God's Israel is a spiritual entity, not a political entity.

Will you get it into your thick skulls that there's not going to be a messianic government? We are not going to be in charge. We are always going to be standing outside of the halls of power approaching the throne, not sitting on it. It is not for us to establish on earth a political kingdom of God because if you do that, you are going to mess it up. You are going to mistake your power with God's power and when you do that, really bad things happen.

And of course, Jesus was right. Three hundred years later for the first time in history Constantine would get a vision that in the sign of the cross he would conquer, *In hoc signo vinces*, and ever since emperors and kings and rulers have confused divine right with human mandate to terrible effect.

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” the disciples asked, still not getting it right. And the answer Jesus gave them was, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that God has set by his own authority.”

Awful, terrible things happen when nations decide that they are God’s instruments for the implementation of divine will and justice on earth. I need only cite the American myth of Manifest Destiny or recent foreign policy which presumes a heavenly mandate to take preemptive action to remove the leaders of other nations with whom we disagree as proof positive of the confusion of human hubris with divine will.

Instead of a timeline for establishing a messianic government, the disciples received a different charge. “You will receive power when the holy spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And as Jesus said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.

And immediately the obligatory and familiar *two men in white robes* appeared. You may remember that Luke tells the story of Easter very similarly with two men in dazzling raiment appearing at the empty tomb asking the women who had come there laden with spices and ointments to anoint Jesus’ body why they were looking for the living among the dead.

But here on ascension day these angels come and stand by the disciples whose jaws are slack down to their knees, amazed at this dazzling display of miraculous power, and wondering whether they could believe what they had seen, when the two men ask, “Why are you standing here rubbing your eyes, with your feet stuck to the ground, looking to heaven? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go.”

And they might have added, “So you’ve got two choices. You can either stand here looking foolish, or you can go back to Jerusalem and get ready to receive this spirit that Jesus has promised, and go and be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, where, maybe, if you’re lucky, you may just see him coming in the same way as you saw him go.”

Since the two men seemed to be saying something that made a lot of sense, the disciples went back to Jerusalem and got ready for their mission.

Now I should say in passing that miracles like the ascension are fascinating to the twenty-first century scientific mind. We want to know how these things work. We want to go to the tapes and view the replays and get several angles on it. Huddle with the umpires and field judges before we make a call about it. This is paranormal stuff and we don’t like to just gloss over it.

So it may be disappointing to you if I tell you that only artists have really spent much time pondering or attempting to understand the ascension. It is marked in the annual calendar of liturgical events. We remember it every year. There is a lovely

church a block away called Ascension that is named for this event on the church year. But it has never really come front and center in Protestant thinking. It was never among the five religious fundamentals that so drove Harry Emerson Fosdick to distraction. It has never had as important a place in our faith as has say the resurrection, the atonement, the incarnation. It just simply isn't as crucial to faith as one might assume.

It's more of a placeholder than anything, and as Dr. Beverly Gaventa has written, "Not only is the ascension rarely mentioned in the New Testament... but the interest in Acts 1 appears to be less in what is happening to Jesus than in what is about to happen in the lives of the earliest Christians."¹ The Ascension as a story about Jesus doesn't want us to stand with our eyes fixed on heaven, watching the clouds, missing the one who is no longer in plain sight. Rather, it sends us back to the world where in the movement and life of everyday experience we will know him present among us.

I suppose the disciples must have had a sense of loneliness, emptiness, a lack of clarity about what should happen next, once Jesus faded from their sight. My mother told me the story a few years after it happened of taking me to college. We spent a few hours unloading the car, getting clothes in drawers and hung in the closet, blankets unpacked, met my roommate, and then we had a bite to eat at a nearby restaurant. She had sewed my name into my clothes, sweaters and jackets and things like that. She had done all she could to get me ready, and help me out.

But eventually the moment came and she had to leave. She got in the car and started the long drive back to Missouri. Somewhere in southern Minnesota she stopped for the night and said she got into the shower and wept for an hour. I was on my own, the last of the four, out from under, and she, a widow, was also on her own now. With my departure to college, she had to figure out what she would be doing with the rest of her life.

I don't suppose Jesus wept when he left the disciples behind, all of them standing there with their mouths agape, watching him leave. But I suppose he might have thought, "Well it's all in their hands now," they who had just finished asking if the old idea of establishing a Davidic monarchy might still be possible. That must have made old Jesus wonder whether he should leave them or not, so ill equipped did they seem, so poorly informed about the dynamite on which they were sitting, and how important it was that they get out and start witnessing to what they had seen and experienced in him.

The Ascension story shines the light away from Jesus and places it on us. It forces us to take seriously the question, "Now that we know how great is God's power in the face of death as displayed in the resurrection, what are we going to do with that knowledge?" How will we share it with others, and how will we be changed by its demands and claims on our life?

Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And how will we do that?

Those who have gone before us have done quite a lot to fulfill that charge over the long history of Christendom. They put up churches, and nurtured congregations, and built hospitals. They sent missionaries around the world, to share the good news of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. From the outset, they cared for the elderly, for widows,

and children, for lepers and outcasts. They witnessed to peace and called people to lives of prayer. They established orphanages and schools and colleges along the way.

They cared for the refugee, the homeless, the poor and suffering. They baptized and ordained, and ministered, and celebrated the Eucharist, they preached, and wrote glorious music in praise of God and to inspire the soul.

It has not been an even witness through the centuries. There is that ignominious period known as the Crusades when the love of God became the hatred of Islam, shadows of which still haunts us today. And Christian triumphalism has led to anti-Semitism, while Biblical fundamentalism has fostered homophobia and the subjugation of women.

There was the slow acceptance of the scientific method, and evolutionary theory, and the persecution of notable scientific pioneers like Copernicus and Galileo. The missionaries who took long journeys to the Hawaiian Islands and who trampled the cultures and mores of other peoples are, in retrospect, not our finest hour. And we American Christians have lost our way at times, ignoring the diverse nature of people who make up this land, declaring it a Christian nation, virtually extinguishing the native American faith of the indigenous people of this continent, and attempting in recent years to impose narrow religious perspectives on the majority of the nation, aligning political policy with Christian extremism.

We forget that when the disciples asked Jesus if he would now establish the Davidic monarchy on earth, he said no. Israel is a spiritual entity not a political entity. We are always going to be standing outside of the halls of power approaching the throne, not sitting on it.

But all of that notwithstanding, all of the human frailty and error and mistakes that we have made along the way attempting to be Christ's faithful witnesses on earth, there is still much to be said for being, as he charged us to be, his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Today I think that means living as faithfully as we can, raising our children in the faith, keeping our own faith strong and nurtured, living in community with those of other faiths, not claiming superiority, but affirming unity as we seek in our separate ways to find our way to the one living God.

It is to embrace the love of God expressed so powerfully in the love of Jesus Christ, who gave his life that we might have life and have it abundantly.

It is to live so that God is able to use us as agents of peace and reconciliation in a world that is warring and broken. It is to live with hope in a time of despair, to set our minds and hearts on heavenly things and lay up treasure in heaven, while the values of accumulation and wealth and greed and selfishness are embraced by others.

It is to live a life of simplicity, while others acquire, to embrace prayer while others around us embrace expediency. It is to trust that God is working in ways seen and unseen to bring about purposes that we can either assist or impede, depending on the life we live and the faith we put to work in the world.

St. Theresa of Avila, the 16th Century Spanish mystic, once wrote of the work and calling that is ours in this life as followers of Christ. It seems especially appropriate on

this Sunday after Ascension, for the emphasis it places on our calling as Christ's disciples charged to be his witnesses. She wrote:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion looks out on the world, yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.

"Why are you standing looking to heaven?" the angels asked the disciples. And Jesus said, "You are my witnesses..." in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. My witnesses... in Greenwich Village, and Chelsea and Gramercy Park and Stuyvesant Town. In Battery Park City and Chinatown, and the upper East and West Sides, in Central Park West and in New Jersey and Staten Island and Brooklyn and the Bronx and Queens. In Washington and Baghdad and Tehran and Darfur.

"You are my witnesses," he said. So why are you standing there looking to heaven?

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¹ **Texts For Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C.** Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, James D. Newsome. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) p. 324