

“Looking Up”

Acts 1: 1 – 14

Makemie Presbyterian Church

May 17, 2009

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; & you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, & to the ends of the earth.”

⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up; a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going & they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

¹¹They said, “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.”

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, & John, & James, & Andrew, Philip & Thomas, Bartholomew & Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, & Simon the Zealot, & Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Monday, our two dogs, Skylark & Seabass were sitting at the basketball hoop, looking up. They just kept staring up at the basketball net. They were so intent on looking up, that I went outside & looked up as well. Then, as people emptied from the courthouse after work, they came over & we were all looking up.

I said, "Crazy dogs."

Someone else said, "What do they see?"

After about a couple of minutes, to rest our necks, we looked around at each other. The dogs, however were still looking up. It was the first time in eight years I actually saw some of these people. You know what I mean; really looked at them. We started smiling.

I said, "It's silly to stand here looking up."

Then someone said, "I'm going home. It's time to start dinner."

We never saw anything looking up, but it was a moment when we saw, really saw, each other. Then we all divided up & drifted away.

On Sunday mornings another kind of division takes place among American people, as some go to church & most stay home. Those who stay home are not taking a week off; church is simply not part of their lives. As far as they are concerned, houses of worship

are little more than pretty antiques, fussed over by wishful thinkers who don't know when to admit they're wrong & go home. It's one of the most peculiar things twenty-first century human beings can do, to come together week after week with no intention of being useful or productive, but only facing an ornate window to declare things they can't prove about a God they can't see.

Our word for it is worship & it's hard to justify in this day & age, but those of us who do it over & over again begin to count on it. This is how we learn where we fit. This is how we locate ourselves between the past & the future, between our hopes & our fears, between the earth & the stars. This is how we learn who we are & what we are supposed to be doing: by coming together to sing & to pray, to be silent & to be still, by peering into the darkness together & telling each other what we see when we do. We may baffle our unbelieving friends & neighbors, but it can't be helped. Half the time we baffle ourselves, proclaiming good news when the news is so bad, trusting the light when the sky is so dark, continuing to wait on the savior in our midst when all the evidence suggests that he packed up & left a long, long time ago.

To be correct, we have been waiting ever since the first Ascension Day, when Jesus led his disciples to a mount called Olivet just outside of Jerusalem, spoke to them for the last time & disappeared inside a cloud for good. You can read about it in the first chapter of the book of Acts, how one moment he was there with them & the next moment he was gone, his well-known hand raised in final blessing, his face grown bright & indistinct, his familiar shape vanishing into the fog like the end of a dream too good to be true – all of it slipping out of their reach until he was no longer there for them, no longer present but past, a memory that would haunt them to the end of their days.

Where he went according to tradition, was to heaven – which may not be up, exactly, as much as it is beyond -- & what he went there to do was to finish what he had begun with us. It was not enough that through him God was born into the body of the world; that was just his Christmas gift to us. His ascension gift was that through him the body of the world was born back to God. By presenting his own ruined, risen body to be seated at the right hand of God, Jesus imported flesh & blood into those holy precincts for the first time. He paved the way for us, so that when we arrive there later

everyone will not be quite so shocked by us. He restored the goodness of creation & ours in particular. By ascending bodily into heaven, he showed us that flesh & blood are good, not bad; that they are good enough for Jesus, good enough for heaven, good enough for God. By putting them on & keeping them on, Jesus has not only brought God to us; he has also brought us to God.

I tried all of this out on a friend last week. I said, "Isn't this incredible?"

"Doesn't this make the ascension come alive for you?"

"Interesting," he said, "but not compelling."

What he meant, I think, is that it's still an abstract idea – an explanation that has very little to do with our day to day experience. Almost everything else that happened to Jesus makes sense in terms of my own life.

He was born to a human mother, so was I.

He ate & drank & slept at night; so do I.

He loved people & got angry with people & forgave people; so have I.

He wept; me too. He died; I will die too.

He rose from the dead; I even know something about that. I have had some Easter mornings of my own " joy found in the mist of sorrow, life in the midst of death.

But ascending into heaven to be seated at the right hand of God? That is where Jesus & I part company. That's where he leaves me in the dust. My only experience of the ascension is from the ground, my neck cranked back as far as it will go, my mouth wide open, my face shielded from the sun by the cloud that is bearing my Lord away.

Luke ends his gospel by telling us that the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy & I expect that's true. But you have to remember that it had just happened for them, that they had been with him & the memory was fresh. They were still running on adrenaline; you can see it in the pictures. Almost every church with stained glass windows has an ascension window tucked away somewhere. In it, Christ generally hovers in the air, his hands upraised in blessing, while the disciples look up at him with something between awe & delight. But he is there with them, -- he is in the window -- & if they went away joyful then I can't help thinking that it was because they thought he would be back in a day or two, next week at the latest.

Two thousand years later, we tend to see the whole thing a little differently. We need a new window to describe our own situation: a window with just us in it – no angels, no Jesus, no heavenly light –

just us, still waiting, still watching the sky, our faces unturned like empty cups that only one presence can fill. But he is not present anymore, not the way he used to be. Ascension Day is the day the present Lord became absent, which is probably why we tend to forget about it. Who wants to celebrate being left behind? Who wants to mark the day that Jesus went out of the world, never to be seen again? Hungry as we are for the presence of God, the one thing we don't need is a day to remind us of God's absence.

Or is that really the one reason, underneath all the other reasons, we are here? Because we have sensed God's absence – in our hollow nights, our pounding hearts, our unanswered prayers. And because those things haven't discouraged us from coming here; have in fact brought us here; to seek the presence we've been missing.

Sometimes I think absence is underrated. It's not *nothing*, after all. It's something; a heightened awareness, a sharpened appetite, a finer perception. When someone important to me is absent from me, I become clearer than ever what it is that person means to me. Details that got lost in our togetherness are recalled in our apartness & their sudden clarity has the power to pry my heart right open. I see the virtues I have overlooked, the opportunities I have missed. The quirks

that drove me crazy at close range become endearing at a distance. From that enlarged perspective, I can see that they are the very things that make my someone *someone* & not just anyone.

There is something else that happens during an absence. If the relationship is strong & true, the absent one has a way of becoming present – if not in body, then in mind & spirit.

My husband John is devoted to hawks & especially the eagles, we see every now & then. Driving down the highway with him can become a test of nerve as he cranes over the steering wheel to peer at the wing feathers of a particularly large bird. Is it an eagle? Or just a turkey vulture? He has to know, even if it means weaving down the road for a while, or running off it from time to time.

“Keep your eyes on the road!” I yell at him. “Who cares what it is? I’ll buy you a bird book; I’ll buy you a bird. Just watch where you are going.” When I went to seminary we spent a couple of months apart & I thought I would get a break from hawks, but instead I began to see them everywhere – loping through the air, spiraling in rising thermals, hunkered down in the tops of trees. Seeing them, really seeing them for the first time in my life, I understood I was not seeing them with my own eyes but with John’s eyes. He wasn’t there, so I

was seeing them for him. He was absent—or was he? He was present in me.

One thing is for sure: There is no sense of absence when there has been no sense of presence. What makes absence hurt, what makes it ache, is the memory of what used to be there but is no longer. Absence is the arm flung across the bed in the middle of the night, the empty space where a beloved sleeper once lay. Absence is the child's room now empty & hung with silence & dust. Absence is the overgrown lot where the old house once stood, the house in which people laughed & thought their happiness would last forever.

You can't miss what you have never known, which makes our sense of absence -- & especially our sense of God's absence – the very best proof that we knew God once & that we may know God again. There is loss in absence, but there is also hope, because what happened once can happen again & only an empty cup can be filled. And isn't it only when we pull that cup out of hiding, when we own up to the emptiness, the absence, the longing inside – isn't it only then that things can begin to change?

It's our sense of God's absence, after all, that brings us to church in search of God's presence. Like a band of forlorn disciples,

we return to this hillside again & again. It's the place we lost track of him; it's the last place we saw him, so of course it's the first place anybody thinks to look for him to come again. We have been coming here a long time now, but even in his absence it's a good place to remember him – to recall best moments & argue about the details, to swap all the old stories until they begin to revive again, the life flowing back into them like feeling into a numb limb. It hurts at first, but then it's fine & the joy of remembering makes the pain seem like a small price to pay.

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” That's what the two men in white robes said to the disciples on the mount called Olivet just outside Jerusalem. Luke calls them men in white robes, anyway, so as not to scare anyone, but you can bet your last nickel that they were angels – angels sent to remind God's friends that if they wanted to see him again, it was no use looking up. Better they should look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their ordinary lives, because that was where they were most likely to find him – not the way they used to know him, but the new way, not in his own body but in their bodies, the

risen, the ascended Lord who was no longer anywhere on earth so that he could be everywhere instead.

No one standing around watching them that day could have guessed what an astounding thing happened when they all stopped looking into the sky & looked at each other instead. On the surface, it was not a great moment: eleven abandoned disciples with nothing to show for all their following. But in the days & years to come it would become very apparent what had happened to them. With nothing but a promise & a prayer, those eleven people consented to become the church & nothing was ever the same again, beginning with them. The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the converts became missionaries, the healed became healers. The disciples became apostles, witnesses of the risen Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit, & nothing was ever the same again. That probably wasn't the way they would have planned it. If they had had it their way, they would probably have tied Jesus up so that he couldn't have gotten away from them, so that they would have known where to find him & rely on him forever. Only that's not how it happened. He went away – he was *taken* away -- & they stood looking up toward

heaven. Then they stopped looking up toward heaven, looked at each other instead, and got on with the business of being the church.

And once they did that, surprising things began to happen. They began to say things that sounded like him, & they began to do things they had never seen anyone but him do before. They became brave & capable & wise. Whenever two or three of them got together it was always as if there was someone else in the room with them whom they couldn't see – the strong, abiding presence of the absent one, as available to them as bread & wine, as familiar to them as each other's faces. It was almost as if he hadn't ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, flew far & wide, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth.

We go to church to worship, to acknowledge the Lord's absence & to seek the Lord's presence, to sing & to pray, to be silent & to be still, to hold out our empty hands & to be filled with bread, with wine, with the abiding presence of the absent Lord until he comes again. Do you miss him sometimes? Do you long for the assurance that you have not been left behind? Then why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Look around you, look around you. Amen.