

Acts 1: 1-11 “Witnesses Not Speculators” Rev. Janet Chapman 5/16/21

Best-selling author Frederich Buechner tells about watching an Italian film, *La Dolce Vita*, in a small college town in the days when you could still go to the movies and there was actually something worth seeing. It will come again, I know. A helicopter is flying slowly through the sky not very high above the ground. Hanging down from the helicopter in a kind of halter is the life-size statue of a man dressed in robes with his arms outstretched so that he looks almost as if he is flying by himself, especially whenever the camera view cuts out the helicopter and all you see is the statue itself with the rope around it. It flies over a field where some workers stop with mouths gaping wide in wonder and then one of the workers recognizes the statue and shouts in Italian, “Hey, it’s Jesus!” This prompts some of them to start running along under the copter, waving and calling to it. But the copter keeps on going, and after a while it reaches the outskirts of Rome, where it passes over a building on the roof of which there is a swimming pool. The pool is surrounded by girls in bikinis which immediately grabs the attention of the pilot and co-pilot who swing around to hover over the pool, where they try to get the phone numbers of the girls above the roar of the engine. They explain they are taking the statue to the Vatican and would be happy to return as soon as they are done. As this unfolds on screen, the tiny theatre is buzzing with laughter at the irony of the whole thing. Here was this sacred statue dangling from the sky, swinging to and fro on the rope, while the lustful pilots are trying to hook up with bathing beauties. Nobody doubted at whose expense the laughter was, but then the helicopter veers away and heads for the Vatican. At this point, the camera zooms in on the statue itself, until the screen is filled with just the bearded face of Christ’s. At that moment, there was no more laughter as people stopped munching their popcorn and slurping their drinks. Nobody laughed because at that moment, there was something about that face that made them grow silent, the face hovering in the sky and the outspread arms. It was as if that face were now their face, a secret face that somehow

belonged to them and to whom they belonged. Buechner writes that at that moment, he understood this is what the Christian faith is about. It is about seeing the face of the Divine and being still. There is so much in religious practice that is out of place in our generation, as out of place as an antique statue flying in the sky, that we find ourselves staring blankly towards the heavens searching for that face which reveals our identity and purpose.

Today's story in Acts sets the scene for Jesus' followers to discover their identity and purpose. If you have ever seen a portrait of what is called the Ascension, it is often sappy or hokey as Jesus floats up through the clouds, toes pointed delicately downward while hands lift upward, seemingly bridging the gap between earth and heaven. A lot of skeptics have laughed at the idea of Jesus defying gravity and floating up to the heavens. Enter Elphaba the green witch in the musical "Wicked" who soars to towering heights musically, and physically, during the singing of one of my favorites, "Defying Gravity." Or John Mayer who belts out "gravity is working against me, gravity wants to bring me down." Such lyrics remind us that those bound by gravity have a hard time envisioning themselves soaring to new heights, ascending insurmountable mountains, and rising to their highest potential. The story opens up Luke's sequel which we call the Acts of the Apostles, it is part 2 with the Gospel of Luke being part one. Luke is continuing to give us an orderly account of the origins and spread of early Christianity. It is not as much history as it is an orderly account as Luke, chapter 1 states, meaning it is not some sort of modern history of Jesus and the early church. By calling it an "orderly account," Luke is helping us understand that the events he is describing to us are "fulfillments" of previous and ancient claims. For example, just as the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament was "lifted up" to God in the midst of a fiery chariot, so Jesus was "lifted up" to God on this day of Ascension. It is Luke's way of connecting Jesus to the Hebrew prophets who came before him and who paved the way for the Messiah to finally restore God's kingdom on earth. Luke's 2 volume collection is not history as we

have studied it in school; it is not meant to be a detailed recording of events, dropped onto YouTube for our ready viewing, but it is Luke preaching and sermonizing about the things that have been experienced. His truth is not rooted in when or where, but in what these events mean and why they are important. This is needed so that Christians can know who they are and what God has called them to do.

James Howell equates it to that famous J.R.R. Tolkien trilogy, “The Lord of the Rings,” where the future of all of Middle Earth relies on the short people, the hobbits, who have little power or influence but upon whom all of life relies. It is true that they have Gandalf, the magical wizard, but the problem is he keeps popping in and out. Gandalf is with the hobbits for a while on their adventure, but then he leaves them on their own. They face horrific difficulties, requiring courage and hope; they need one another, they must stick together. Gandalf shows up again at the climax, but then bids them farewell once more. Just as Gandalf trusted the little ones with their limited abilities, so Jesus trusts the unlikely ones he is leaving here on earth.

But before the Risen Christ leaves the unlikely ones, they ask him a burning question which still rings in our ears today. They ask, “Is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel? You said that the kingdom of God is near. Is now the time that everything we have waited for will come to pass?” Christ responds, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth.” So as the Messiah floats above them and they stare with mouths wide open, (after all, wouldn’t you?) they are told to stay put, be patient, and wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. As John Holbert notes, they are enamored with the ascending Christ, necks strained upward, hoping for a further sign, for a magic act, for a cloud spelling out the words “I love you!”? But no, suddenly two men appear to them. You may remember that two men appeared at the empty grave and tried to explain to the women who were looking for Jesus’ dead body, that they were looking in the wrong

place. Again they say, you are looking in the wrong place. “Why do you stand looking into heaven?” they ask. Didn’t you pay attention just a few moments ago? Well, I don’t know, I suffer from short term memory loss, what exactly are you saying? He said, “Go!” and you are rooted on this spot, looking longingly for some further word from him. He will come back the same way that he went, but you need ask no further questions about when, they imply. “When” is simply not the right question to ask.

It begs the question, “Why in heaven’s name (and I mean that literally) do so many Christians spend vast amounts of time, inordinate amounts of energy, large amounts of speculation, asking precisely that question?” When will Christ come again? We have been asked to be “his witnesses” to the world, not his calculators for his return. It is a mystery to me why this is so, and has been that way throughout Christian history. The answer, one supposes, is that it is far safer, far less demanding, to be a speculator than a witness; to speculate the time and determine that these must be the end times with pandemics, wildfires, Middle East at war, earthquakes, etc. Speculators write books of calculations, hold seminars that attract thousands, rake in untold piles of loot, always predicting a certain time for Jesus’ return. Witnesses, on the other hand, just witness to the truth of the gospel: the truth of justice for the whole world, the love of enemies, and the care for the outcast and marginalized. Witnesses spend less time looking up to the heavens and more time looking face to face to see each other and help meet the needs of our brothers and sisters. Certainly, there is a time and place to look up, to be still, to recognize God’s defiance of gravity in our own lives, but this ordering of events from Luke is more a commission, more a sending forth. Acts, chapter 1, makes it very clear that what the worlds needs is far fewer speculators... and far more witnesses.