

The Ascension of Christ

Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 16, 2021

Sermon Text, Acts 1:1-11

1:1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.¹¹ “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.

Sermon, “Why Are You Looking Up”

It was the last day of Vacation Bible School and the teachers and leaders wanted to do something special with the kids. It wasn't a large VBS; only a dozen children had participated in the weeklong program. But that was considered a good turnout, given the fact that the population of the community was just under 100.

The fellowship hall had been decorated with helium-filled balloons for the Friday evening wrap-up party and the children were excited. As they ate their cake and ice cream, they wondered about the balloons. What were they going to do with them?

Their questions were answered as they wiped the last traces of ice cream from their chins. They took the balloons outside and—after lining up for pictures—released the balloons into the air.

Children and adults stood together on the lawn of the church, mesmerized by the sight of the balloons sailing upward, little round splashes of color against a blue sky.

Each child chattered on about the balloon she or he had released.

“Look at mine go!”

“Mine's the highest!”

“Do you think my balloon will go into outer space?”

The sailed higher. And higher. And higher still, prompting one little boy to remark, “They’re all getting smaller.”

Even though I was an adult, I was just as enthralled as the children, watching our balloons ascend into the heavens until they had climbed so high that they faded from sight.

The memory of those ascending balloons makes this question—asked by angels standing beside the disciples—all the more thought-provoking: *Why do you keep looking up?*

We’re not talking helium balloons in Acts 1; we’re talking about a Man released from the earth and rising into the heavens without the aid of wings or helium or even chariots of fire.

Why do you keep looking up?

If a child’s helium balloon can so capture our attention, how much more would the sight of Jesus ascending into heaven!

Why do you keep looking up?

I think if I had been present there at Bethany that day, I would have said to those angels, “Duh!” I mean, this isn’t the sort of thing you see every day, so I’m going to watch. And I’m going to make sure I register it on my mind’s memory bank and replay it in my mind’s eye time and time and time again.

Still, the question lingers. Even today, long after the Lord has ascended into the heavens, we find ourselves looking up still. And still the angels of heaven inquire of us, “Why do you keep looking up?”

I was all set to answer that question in the course of my sermon when the Spirit stopped me. That question assumes that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are indeed looking up. But that may not be the case. There are lots of things which can pull our gaze away from Christ, especially in these days. So before I can ask, “Why are you looking up to heaven?” I have to ask, **“Are you looking up?”**

We’re in the fourteenth month of the coronavirus pandemic, and I realize there are some very hopeful signs of recovery. Just this past Friday the State of Illinois shifted into Phase 4.5, the Bridge Phase. And on Thursday, the CDC relaxed mandates for the wearing of masks for those who are fully vaccinated. The City of Chicago has given permission to the Cubs to increase capacity at Wrigley Field to 60 percent.

And yet, we’ve suffered much over these past fourteen months. We’ve seen far too many people die; far too many businesses close; and far too many public gatherings cancelled. One of the churches I served in Pike County didn’t make it through the pandemic; Florence UMC closed last October.

And in the midst of the pandemic, we’ve gone through racial unrest and riots; a contentious election cycle; and economic hardship. Many are struggling with depression and a variety of losses. There are many reasons why we may not be looking up.

It would be inappropriate for me to say, “Just start looking up!” I recognize that such so-called encouraging words may only add guilt to what a person may be going through. And there may be some significant physical or psychological issues which must be addressed.

So let me say this: please get the help you need from the appropriate medical or psychological professionals. But as you do, please also ask the Holy Spirit to help you look up to Jesus. That’s one of the reasons why God the Father sent the Spirit to us: to help us. And please know this: the disciples spent three years with Jesus before they looked up. But once they came face-to-face with the realization that Jesus Christ had come to earth to overcome the powers of evil and darkness, they were finally able to look up. That’s the message of Ephesians 1 which Mike read a few moments ago. Paul’s words are worth another read:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the **hope** to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. (Ephesians 1:17-19a)

Jesus came to conquer death and the grave. He came to give us hope. He came to give us life—a life that is rich and abundant and which transcends all that is of this world.

In Luke 21, Jesus said when you see signs that trouble you, when your heart grows faint and weary, when it looks as though the heavens themselves are being shaken, then “lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh” (Luke 21:28).

Now that we’ve addressed the question of whether or not we’re looking up, now we can go on to ask the question the angels asked: **Why are you looking up to heaven?**

As I already suggested, we as human beings need hope. Having hope is related to having a vision, and the Bible says that without a vision the people perish (Proverbs 29:18).

We need hope like we need the air that we breathe. We need hope like we need the water that we drink. We need hope like we need bread (or, depending on your dietary needs, gluten free rice cakes!) And looking up is how we express our need for hope.

Someone once said that “hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things.” It doesn’t matter if you’re an optimist or a pessimist. We all look for hope. We all need hope. We all crave hope.

How often have I stood beside a hospital bed and read the words of Psalm 121: “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not suffer they foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber...the Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not

smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil. He shall preserve thy soul..."

The angels of heaven ask us, "Why do you keep looking up?" And we respond, "Because we need hope." But that's not the only reason we keep looking up. We also look up because we need change.

When you see something remarkable, you run the risk of being more than a casual observer. We are not digital beings. We are flesh and blood and subject to change. A digital camera takes a picture, but that camera is not changed by the picture it takes. On the other hand, if and when you witness something, you run the risk of being changed by what you see.

A young boy witnesses a house fire and is so moved by what he sees that years later he becomes a fireman. He is changed by what he has seen.

A 19-year-old-man sees a program at his college about poverty in Cambodia and is so moved by what he sees that for the next two years he becomes a Peace Corps volunteer in Southeast Asia. He is changed by what she has seen.

An elderly couple sees an infomercial about children starving in South Sudan, Africa, and is so moved by what they see that they agree to sponsor a child through Compassion International. They are changed by what they have seen.

Eleven disciples watched as Jesus ascended into heaven and they were so moved by what they saw that they went into Jerusalem to wait for the Holy Spirit which was promised to them. And after receiving the Holy Spirit they went into throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Italy and to the "uttermost parts of the earth" to spread the Good News that Jesus Christ came to earth to save sinners from hell and welcome them into eternal life. The disciples were changed by what they saw. They were transformed from fishermen and tax collectors into witnesses for Jesus Christ.

"Men of Galilee, why do you keep looking up? "Because we want to be transformed into people that God can use for his glory. We want to be witnesses for Jesus Christ. And we know we can't do it on our own."

A witness is not someone who has merely seen Christ; a witness is someone who has experienced Christ and can tell others about it so they might be likewise transformed. And that really leads us to the third answer to the question asked by the angels. But this time, the question must be asked a bit differently: Why do you keep looking up? As if to add, "C'mon. Get going. You can't stand here gazing up into the sky all day. There's work to be done. Get a move on!"

Have you ever tried to walk somewhere while you were looking up? It doesn't work because inevitably you will stumble! Why do you keep looking up when you need to get moving! The church will never move forward if all it's doing is looking up.

There's a wonderful—and familiar story—in Exodus 14. Under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites have just escaped slavery in Egypt. But they've only gotten as far as the Red Sea. They look ahead, and their path is blocked by a seemingly uncrossable water barrier. They look behind and they see that they are being pursued by the army of pharaoh. Not knowing what else to do, they cry out to the Lord in prayer.

I love the way the Living Bible translates God's response: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Quit praying and get the people moving! Forward, march!'" (vs. 15)

Too often the church has been guilty of spending all its time gazing up into heaven rather than moving forward. There comes a time when we have to "quit gazing and get moving." We can't just look up to God; we must also look out and see the needs in the world around us. There are people around us who need food, clothing and shelter. There are people around us who simply need our friendship. But we'll never see them if we spend all our time gazing up to heaven.

There are people around us who need our hope. Peter wrote that we should "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (I Peter 3:15).

In other words, when we look to God with hope, there are those around us who want to know why we have such hope. We must ever hear and be ready to turn to them with the answer.

Why do you keep looking up? Because we need hope. We need change. And once we have discovered that hope and experienced that change, then we'll get moving as his transformed witnesses, properly equipped with the Good News of God's salvation.

Thanks be to God!