

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Why Do You Stand Looking Up Toward Heaven?

Lesson: Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53 NRSV

Acts 1: 1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After 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. ⁴ While 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; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But 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." ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They 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."

Luke 24: ⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." ⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Today is the last Sunday of Easter and Ascension Sunday. Also, from next Sunday, Pentecost begins. On the 40th day after Jesus' resurrection, he said goodbye to his

disciples, and ascended to heaven. Today is the Sunday we commemorate the event. Eleven years ago, I visited the Chapel of the Ascension on Mount Olive in Jerusalem. There were traces of footprints on the stone in the center of the church. The stone's footprints were kept as if people had witnessed the ascension. Of course, there is no way to know exactly whether the footprints belong to Jesus or someone else, but the stone was placed there to commemorate Jesus' ascension.

The Ascension of Jesus is an important part of the Christian faith. This event is also written in the Apostles' Creed: "Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty..."

When the day came when Jesus has to ascend, he was with his disciples. The disciples must have been confused and anxious about their separation from Jesus. The disciples have already experienced separation from Jesus on the cross. Although their faith is still unclear, the day had come to say goodbye to the resurrected Lord. So, he comforted them saying, "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." (Acts 1:8 NRSV) And then, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. (9) While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two angels stood by them and said that "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" (10-11a)

By the way, the question of angels feels a little awkward to us. The reason is that Jesus ascended, so it is natural for us to look there. Furthermore, it is our idea to build a monument on the site and let future generations know that Jesus ascended. But, the angels asked "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" It's as if they are asking the disciples, and us, how it is that we have so dramatically missed the point of the whole Jesus event. The disciples and we focus on Jesus' ascension, but the angels tell us our focus should be elsewhere.

Historically, humans have regarded the heaven as important, and the will of heaven, the kingdom of heaven as important. Especially, in agricultural society, the heaven was very important because people needed rain on time. Therefore, primitive religions used to offer sacrifices to ask heaven to rain. It was so natural for humans to look up to heaven and seek the will of heaven, just as the disciples were looking up to heaven when Jesus ascended.

But, the angels asked why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This is because the point of this story is not that Jesus took flight, nor is it enough to say that Jesus simply returned to God to dwell with God in glory.

As Jesus suffered crucifixion and died on the cross, and was buried, and descended into hell, and rose again from the dead, he fulfilled everything written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms. (Luke 24:44) Jesus became the universal, omnipresent Christ. So, repentance and forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem, and he opened the way of salvation and redemption in earth. (47) This is why we confess that in the Lord's Prayer, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The reason the angels asked why are you looking heavenward was to tell you that you should focus on earth, not heaven because both heaven and earth are made into one, inseparable reality bound together by the goodness of the God who saves both.

Then, what does it mean to look at the earth? This means the real action for the repentance and forgiveness of sins on earth, and that is where God intends our focus to be. If we look up to heaven alone, we can't hear the problems of the earth, the screams of the hungry, the sick, and those in need.

God came to the earth, made himself a fully human, suffered pain, died, and resurrected because He wanted everyone on the earth to be witnesses of Christ and forgive each other's sins by loving. So, the church should focus on the purpose why God came here, for this is where God was made fully human, where God offers salvation and redemption, and where God has promised to return and dwell with God's people.

Historically, we, humans, have destroyed and exploited this planet for our own, for God saw fit to give God's self entirely. Jesus opened the way of salvation on earth. Now, it's our turn to respond to his grace and love. Just as God sent his Son Jesus to the earth, Jesus sent his disciples and us to the ends of the earth. What we should do on earth is written in Ephesians 1:17-18 NRSV: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you..."

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection fulfilled everything written in the Old Testament and made both heaven and earth into one in Christ. Now He calls all witnesses of Christ hope of the earth and is sending us to love together, build peaceable communities, and reconcile to each other. These practices create hopeful futures

for people and communities, realize heaven on this earth, and show the presence of God among us here and now. Jesus' ascension enables us to "know what is the hope to which he has called you" when we also work to make heaven and earth into one, inseparable reality bound together in God. (Eph 1:18 NRSV)

If we really believe in the name of Jesus Christ and we believe that is possible, then it is that hope that we should offer the world and make known in the communities we lead and in which we participate. May we be the hope to the earth by the name of Christ, and create heaven on this earth in the communities we lead and in which we participate. Amen.