

LOOKING UP TOWARD HEAVEN

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 47
Acts 1:1-11

The more I've read about the history of the early church, the more impressed I am by the fact that the church is here at all. In many ways, it all seems so improbable. Jesus himself was *A Marginal Jew*, as one scholar's trilogy about the historical Jesus was called.¹ As best we know, his first followers were primarily simple peasants from the rural backwater of Jewish Palestine. At the time of his execution, they seem to have deserted him en masse and scattered, like bewildered and terrified rats from a sinking ship. Yet, somehow, this motley crew managed to pull together again and forge a common new identity as a community of faith that spread far beyond its roots in Judea and Galilee; an enduring movement that continued to grow despite persecutions from without and heresy within, despite corruption and schism; a church that has survived and evolved for nearly 2,000 years to become—despite all our problems—one of the great success stories of human history.

The beginnings were so humble. It reminds me of a classic tale of rags to riches, like Henry Ford in his garage or Bill Gates in his dorm room. Ford and Gates, of course, were dynamic leaders, with a clear sense of vision and a single-minded determination to see it realized. You can appreciate the shrewdness with which they placed their bets on emerging technologies. You can admire their perseverance and pluck or perhaps recoil from the ruthlessness of their drive to win. No matter how you feel about them or their now ubiquitous products, their paths to wealth and fame are plain enough to trace.

What a contrast from the first disciples, the ones Jesus left behind on Mount Olivet, that day when “he was hidden by a cloud and [seen] no more,”² as today's text puts it. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but it's hard for me imagine any of these characters managing their way out of a paper bag, let alone leading a global church. Talk about underachievers! They've spent three years on the road together, watching Jesus preach and teach and heal, literally sitting at his feet in a way that you and I can never do. Yet as Jesus passes the torch to them in this morning's lesson, they seem still to have no clue about what the ministry of Christ is all about. They still don't really understand who Jesus is or what he's doing.

Here they are, in their last moments together with Jesus, still asking, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”³ They still don't get it. They are caught up in an old way of thinking. They've expected God's Messiah to come in glory like the cavalry charging in, swords drawn and blazing, to annihilate the enemies of God

¹ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 3 vols., The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991-2001),

² Acts 1:9.

³ Acts 1:6.

and set God's chosen people free from colonial rule. They can't envision a humble Messiah, a suffering servant whose weapons are love and an obedience to God's truth no matter what the personal cost. You would think, after the events of Holy Week—seeing Jesus crucified, dead and buried, and then, unimaginably, alive again, risen in that Easter triumph over death and despair—they would finally understand. If not at once, then certainly now that he has appeared to them again, during these forty days since Easter: outside the tomb and at Emmaus and in the Upper Room and at the seashore, broiling fish. Surely, by now, they must see him as he truly is.

But no. Even as he's fading out of sight—his scarred hand “raised in a final blessing, his face grown bright and indistinct, his familiar shape vanishing into the fog like the end of a dream good too be true”⁴—they're asking “Lord, *now* are you going to make Israel a nation to be reckoned with again?”

Jesus had told them that he was the vine and they were the branches. “Apart from me you can do nothing”⁵, he had said. Now Jesus is gone, never to be seen again. He is “no longer there for them, no longer present but past, a memory that will haunt them until the end of their days.”⁶ Where does that leave them?

Or us, for that matter. For aren't we really in the same boat? Left behind to proclaim Jesus as Lord over a world that looks pretty much the way it always has. Left behind to tell the story of God's fidelity and generosity to a world that hears daily the stories of fear, greed and violence—real life stories that seem to mock his call to neighborliness and love for one another, even as they reinforce the anxious selfishness that dominates both personal and public life.

At least for those original disciples, as they stood “looking up toward heaven,” the memory of him was fresh. Luke tells us at the end of his gospel that they “returned to Jerusalem with great joy”⁷, and that could well be true. Why not? They expected him back soon enough, in weeks or maybe months, not centuries or millennia. We have the benefit of hindsight—2,000 years worth. And here we are, as Barbara Brown Taylor once put it—“just us, still waiting, still watching the sky, our faces turned up like empty cups that only one presence can fill. But he's not present anymore, at least not the way he used to be.”⁸

I grew up in a big family. My grandfather was the classic patriarch at the center of it, like a great sun around whom orbited his five children and sixteen grandchildren and I don't know how many great grandchildren and various in-laws. We were widely scattered, like most modern families, but Pop (as we called him) was the strong magnet that pulled us all together. His love for each one was palpable, and through him we learned to love one another. Since he's been gone—more than 35 years now—we still see one another, but mostly these days at weddings and funerals. I always find that his absence at those gatherings sharpens my awareness of what he meant to me and of what he still means to me. Details that might have gotten lost when we were together are recalled now that we are apart. Sometimes, their sudden clarity bring tears to my eyes.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), 73.

⁵ John 15:15.

⁶ Taylor, 73.

⁷ Luke 24:52.

⁸ Taylor, 74.

And I notice, too, that my absent grandfather has a way of becoming present in those moments—if not in body, then in mind and, especially, spirit.

Those of you who have been reading ahead in the lectionary will realize that next Sunday is the Day of Pentecost, when we will mark the sending of the Holy Spirit to those first followers of Christ, the great gift of God’s power that Jesus promises to his disciples twice in this morning’s brief passage. I will have more to say about the coming of the Holy Spirit next week. But note, for today, how the story of Jesus’ ascension provides the essential transition point between Easter and Pentecost. It closes the narrative of God’s saving activity in Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh, and opens—as in a prelude—a new chapter of salvation history, in which God is active in the world as God’s Holy Spirit. It is a chapter still being written.

The festival of Ascension which we celebrate today is also a bridge in our liturgical life. It takes us from the exhilaration of Easter—a great family reunion with the One in whom we all live and move and have our being—toward the work of witness and reconciliation in the larger world to which he has called us. It is a moment for us to pause and remember that we have, in fact, been left behind. Like those first disciples, we have no power of our own. We can generate none for ourselves. We have no claim and no cause for self congratulation. All of us are at times anxious and bewildered as we wait for our Lord. Much has been entrusted to us, as Christ’s ambassadors. It is only human for us to miss him.

Professor Taylor writes that you cannot miss what you have never known, and that it is “our sense of absence and especially our sense of God’s absence [that is] the very best proof that we knew God once and that we may know God again...It is 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 hilltop again and again. It is the place we lost track of him; it is the last place we saw him, so of course it is the first place that anyone thinks to look for him to come again.”⁹

But “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” That’s what the two men in white robes who suddenly appeared on Mount Olivet said to the disciples that night. “If you want to see him again, it’s no use looking up. Look around instead, at each other, at the world, at ordinary people living ordinary lives, because that’s where you’re most likely to find him. Not the way you used to know him, but in a new way”¹⁰ as a risen, ascended Lord who by the power of the Holy Spirit is present and comes to meet us in all the joys and sorrows of our days.

Jesus said, “You must wait here, until God gives you his power, as he has promised to do and as I have told you.”¹¹ Friends, God keeps God’s promises. That group of eleven abandoned men, “together,” Luke tells us, “with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers”¹² surely, all told, a group no more in number than we are as we gather virtually today—they received a power that caused their fragile little community to have energy, courage, imagination and resources completely

⁹ Taylor, 76.

¹⁰ Taylor, 77.

¹¹ Cf. Luke 24:49.

¹² Acts 1:14.

disproportionate to its size. Through the inscrutable generosity of God, they became the church. The followers became leaders, witnesses, preachers, missionaries, healers, apostles. It probably wasn't the way they wanted it—they would have kept Jesus right there in the midst of them!—but that was what they got.

When they stopped looking up toward heaven and started looking at each other and getting about the business of being the church, surprising things began to happen. Taylor describes it well: “They began to say things that sounded like him, and they began to do things they had never seen anyone but him do before. They became brave and capable and wise. Whenever two or three of them got together it was always as if there were someone else in the room with them whom they could not see—the strong abiding presence of the absent one, as available to them as bread and wine, as familiar to them as each other's faces. It was almost as if he had not ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, flew far and wide, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth.

“[And still today, we come together] to worship, to acknowledge the Lord's absence and to seek the Lord's presence, to sing and to pray, to be silent and to be still, to hold out the empty cups of our hands and 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 assurance that you have not been left behind? Then why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Look around you, look around.”¹³

All authority and power and dominion to the name that is above all names—Jesus Christ our Lord—now and in the age to come. Amen.

¹³ Taylor, 78.