

TEXT: Acts 1:6-11 So when they had come together, the disciples asked Jesus, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘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 has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.’

UP, UP AND AWAY. It’s a pretty lame sermon title, isn’t it? If you pay attention to such things, you could figure out that when I had to produce this title, I had no idea what I might say. I remember Lisa Larges once telling me she was going to preach Ascension. I looked at her incredulously. “Why?” “I dunno,” she said, “just cuz no one ever does.” “Besides,” she added, “it sounds interesting.” Interesting. I pondered that word. Then I remembered a comment from my clergy email group. Someone wrote “It’s not an important part of my faith tradition, so it’s not something on my radar screen.” I’ve been well schooled in the admonition, Beware of Contempt before Investigation. So I settled in -- and I actually began to find the message of Ascension rather interesting indeed!

This scene begins with an upward view. The strange picture conjures up Jesus escorted upward as if part of a giant Mylar balloon, floating through a multi hued sky, backlit with the bright shining sun, disappearing into great billowing clouds; angels hovering; and the disciples, struck dumb, staring upward. There is a sense of awe here, a second Easter with its triumph over the natural order and its promise of great things to come in that other bright and brilliant place. Christ returns to the heavenly splendor from whence he came, back into the glory and order of the divine community above, claiming his place in the Holiest of Holies.

Isn’t this, after all, the Christian hope? We would follow Jesus as best we can, not simply in what he tells us to do and how he invites us to live, and then, when it’s our time, also to that place where he has gone. I don’t think we really expect that the Christ will in all good sense and justice come back to dwell on earth, unless perhaps it’s right here in California, – providing we cut it off, just around Monterey— No really, isn’t it that we will embrace this time on earth, grow in loving and in self knowledge, and ultimately be with God, elsewhere? Ascension reminds us of that other place, that “better country” as the book of Hebrews puts it.

Such wonder and awe, such reminders of a God above all Gods, are not luxuries in God’s kin-dom; they are necessities born of God’s promises and inviting us into intimacy with the holy and the divine. They are our mountaintops. But they are not in and of themselves sufficient. “Why do you stand there looking up?” asks the angels.

In *A Grief Obsessed*, C.S. Lewis puts it this way, "Talk to me about the truth of religion, and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand." Following Christ is not easy, but it is definitely liberating and it is definitely deeply satisfying. And it definitely embraces us within a community of belonging and of awakening. We don't often seek our own change and growth on our own, but we always celebrate it as the richest part of our living.

There is no question that the disciples would gladly have gone up into the clouds with Jesus. In the midst of their awe, they must have felt abandoned all over again, rooted in deep nauseous fear, left to cope alone in an alien and hostile environment. Given the choice between returning to the mundanities of Galilee or partaking of the glories of heaven, who wouldn't? But they, like ourselves, are called to live life and to love life, in William Auden's phrase, "for the time being."

We must get on with Jesus work in a world without the person of Christ, a world that is impoverished in spirit and that daily devises more means to make life increasingly nasty, brutish and short. Our work is here. Get on with it, the angels say. So --shaking off our yearning for Christ, and our transfixed wonder, we ask, how?

Wait. Jesus says, wait for "the gift that God has promised."

But, we complain, we don't like waiting. We don't like not knowing. I can hear the hopeful eagerness as the disciples ask "Will you at this time restore the kingdom?" I can hear the sighs and soft grumbles when Jesus admonishes, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority."

Simon and Garfunkel once sang a song with the line, God only knows, God makes his plan. The information's unavailable to the mortal man." We'd like to know the plan; we'd like to put the schedule on our calendar. My goodness, some of the disciples had been thinking about their positions in the new kingdom as far back as the journey to Jerusalem. But Jesus says, trust me. Wait.

Furthermore, The Bible indicates an important quality or task in this waiting. Waiting, for these disciples, was to be marked by reflection. Think of what they had been through during the past three years! They had been taught new views about life and religion. They had a new concept of God-- no longer a stern and exacting law-giver, but a Creator who loved his creatures, who was patient, long-suffering and kind and could be crabby but was always generous. And in their Master they saw - as Leslie Weatherhead phrased it - all of God that could be poured into a solitary human being. Then came Calvary and their whole world collapsed like a house of cards. But Easter Day dawned and they and the world were arrested by an unprecedented phenomenon, an unimagined surprise: Jesus arose, and for forty days he moved in and out among them, somehow but always wavering upon the frontier of two worlds.

Those disciples had changed. They had been asked to find an identity, to begin to take their masks off, the masks of son or husband or friend or fisherman or tax collector; to look beyond their own limited circles to a world of people and teaching and discovery. Giving up their tribal clothing, they had been asked to become as children, spontaneous and genuine and vulnerable. They'd been asked to reconcile with enemies and put away self-serving judgments and projection of guilt or blame. They'd been asked to love the unloveable and value the least of the least. God's standards, Christ taught, not the standards of the culture --standards of intention and authenticity and love. Christ calls us to live in the moment, to value the journey, to keep doing the next right thing, regardless of outcome, to seek that kin-dom within – and to be ready to receive the Spirit.

This is what we also are called to do in the wake of the Ascension. "I will not leave you" promised Jesus. I will not leave you comfortless. I will not leave you without assistance. But I want you to become whole. God waits for us to spin around, to see with new eyes a new creation happening, a kingdom just waiting for us to happen as well. It is not a matter of achieving some impossible saint like condition, but of being a faithful work-in-progress. working to become complete or whole in our complexities. Our work in this waiting is to trust in Christ's human experience and in God's creative power to allow ourselves to remove our masks of perfection or achievement or goodness or martyrdom or victimhood.

Jesus asked us to look within and claim our strength, our vulnerability, our full self. He said, "You shall be cunning as serpents, but harmless as doves" (Matt. 10L16) That is, you will be involved in things of the world but not given to the collective values of the world; wise to the seductions and systems of the world, but conscious of higher motives and utterly surrendered to the Spirit of Christ.

Our faith is dynamic – it is a development, a movement, a process that takes us from where we are, familiar and comfortable as that may be, to where we are meant to be. Growing up means growing into the full measure of Christ, as Paul puts it, seeking his height, attaining his stature. It is not growing any way we please, or growing as nature permits, it is growth into the particular stature of Christ, who provides the standard, the measuring rod by which we judge our growth.

Augustine said that Christ departed from our eyes so that we should return to our own hearts and find him there.

It would be easier if Christ had not gone. If he were here, we could ask him face to face who is right about all those important disagreements of the church and of the world...all those things we have been talking about recently, immigrant law and whether there is a just war and environmental disaster and energy conservation and health care...all that stuff he didn't get around to in the Gospels. Of course, we assume we'd like the answers. But even if we didn't, we could accommodate ourselves to them if we just knew for sure. And what a comfort it would be just to see the face of the one we follow or talk to someone who saw his face last week. But this is not to be. We are required to be more adult than that.

Instead we have this Christ whom we cannot hold or touch. Instead we have the memory and teaching of this Jesus of Nazareth and all that we have seen in him, his earthliness, his affection for children, his tears, his compassion, his fury with hypocrites and dishonest pride is patience with us who are slow to learn the power, the magnificent power of suffering love. We have this Christ. And this, the Ascension, says even more : Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. That faith has the power to spin us around, that spirit has the ability to take our eyes from the heavens to the work God is doing and to show us how to live not in a long goodbye, but as the fruitful, joyful people we were always meant to become.

May it be so.