

Ascension Sunday B
John 17:11-18 & Acts 1:6-11
May 16, 2021

Looking Up, Living Down
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

John 17:11-18

[Jesus prayed:] ¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but [those whom you gave me] are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy God, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me . . . ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

Acts 1:6-11

⁶So when [the apostles] had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set by divine authority. ⁸But 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.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two beings in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, “People 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.”

*In sound and in silence,
in words prayed and sung and spoken,
speak your word for us, O God,
that hearing it, we might go forth as witnesses
to Jesus' way in our world. Amen.*

This scene from the book of Acts is so familiar and yet, like so many stories from scripture, each time it's read, I hear something new. When I think of the Ascension, I imagine a verdant grassy hillside with a crowd of people and Jesus at the center. There's tension and uncertainty in the air. Jesus is talking like he won't be there much longer, but he just came back! He commissions the crowd, "Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth!" And then he disappears into the clouds while the awe-struck crowd strains to see where he's gone to. And then the angels come. This is the part that struck me this time as I read the text. They say, "People of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" As I often do, I think this question, these words of Luke aren't really meant for the crowd—they're meant for us. In plain English, I think the angels were basically saying, "People, why do you stand around looking into the sky? He's gone. Show's over. And there's work to be done *here*. Better get to it."

What would it have been like if those first believers had stayed on that grassy hillside looking up at the sky or retired to their homes to wonder where Jesus went or when he was coming back? What would it have been like if their focus stayed on the heavens instead of back here on earth? Well, for one thing, they would have been mightily disappointed. Jesus was gone and he never did come back. Those early believers would've died out waiting and the church, the whole Jesus movement, would've died out with them. Clearly, that's not what happened. They got to work.

As I see it, the point of this text is a simple one: as Christians, our focus isn't meant to be on heaven. Our focus is meant to be right here, right now: living as witnesses in our world to the way of Jesus—of working together, healing and loving and caring for one another and for others, caring for the planet that is our home, and sowing seeds of justice and

peace so that the people and the creatures who live together on earth can live well. For the author of Luke/Acts, the focus of the church isn't heaven, it's earth.

Unfortunately, many churches and many Christians seem to be preoccupied with the former—with just waiting around for Jesus, or waiting to get to heaven themselves, or busying themselves by telling others about Jesus while they wait. I wonder though if these folks are hearing the angels' question and taking it to heart: "People, why do you stand around looking into the sky? He's gone. Show's over. And there's work to be done *here*. Better get to it."

As many of you will remember, Johnny Cash once sang a song called "No Earthly Good" and I think the lyrics still have a timely message to all Jesus' followers who play the waiting game. The lyrics to the last two verses go like this:

The gospel ain't gospel until it is spread
But how can you share it where you've got your head
There's hands that reach out for a hand if you would
So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good

If you're holding heaven, then spread it around
There's hungry hands reaching up here from the ground
Move over and share the high ground where you stood
So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good

Friends, the gospel is meant to be shared. Jesus calls us to be his witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth, but there's a lot more to being a witness than just directing traffic on the highway to eternity or playing the waiting game until Jesus comes back or we meet him in heaven. As Christians, our gaze can't stay fixed on the clouds. If we're only looking up, we can't be living down—we can't be seeing need, addressing pain and brokenness, appreciating beauty, making peace, and building heaven's realm of justice and love in the actual world we live in. And that's what we're supposed to be all about.

In the text that Nancy read a few minutes ago, we hear Jesus engaged in a lengthy prayer for his followers. At one point he prays, “I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world . . . protect them in your name that . . . they may be one, as we are one.” Jesus understood that his followers would face challenges. They would share his message with unreceptive crowds. They would struggle to make ends meet. They would face persecution for their beliefs. And today, on this Mental Health Sunday, I have to believe he understood that they might even face depression or serious mental illness. He didn’t promise his followers that it would be easy, but he did pray God’s protection for them. He named an important reality too. “I’m no longer in the world,” he said, “but they are . . . protect them.”

That is the reality of the Ascension. Jesus is no longer in the world, but we are. I can almost imagine the angels with us now, repeating the same message given to Jesus’ followers so long ago: “People, why do you stand around looking into the sky? He’s gone. Show’s over. And there’s work to be done *here*. Better get to it.”

What work might we as individuals or as a community have been waiting to do?

St. Teresa of Avila once famously said, “Christ has no body now on earth but ours; ours are the only hands with which he can do his work, ours are the only feet with which he can go about the world, ours are the only eyes through which his compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world.” I think she’s absolutely right, but we can’t be Jesus’ body, Jesus’ hands and feet, Jesus’s eyes, ears, mouth, and heart in and for the world if we don’t stop looking up and start living down. That is the reality of the Ascension. That is the commission of the one who calls his followers to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. That is the charge of all who call themselves by his name—Christian—little Christ. Stop looking up. Start living down. May it be so with us. Amen.