

Don't Just Stand There Looking Up

Acts 1:1-11

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Lake Forest, Illinois

This is a critical time in the long and distinguished life of the First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest, and I am deeply honored to have been invited to spend several Sunday mornings with you in the days and months ahead.

I have discovered a lovely secret. You know, people who live downtown and spend most of their time downtown, as I have for thirty-two years, become a little insular and parochial. We think that Lake Forest geographically is somewhere in the far north close to Wisconsin, maybe up around Green Bay.

We center city dwellers watch the rush hour traffic reports with a combination of smugness and terror. When I tell people that I am driving to Lake Forest on Sunday morning, they offer condolences. Advise me to leave early – to steel myself for a tedious experience. Maybe start the night before. The lovely secret which I promise not to share is that driving to Lake Forest early Sunday morning is a breeze. A lovely, leisurely expedition with good music on the radio, and my coffee, and door to door takes no more than thirty five to forty minutes. It was exactly thirty-eight minutes this morning – the time urbanites can spend waiting for the elevator. So, I do love being here. I love driving up here on Sunday morning, and I promise solemnly not to share my secret with anyone. Let us pray.

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your Word that hearing we might believe and believing, trust you with our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The New Testament lesson this morning is from the Acts of the Apostles, the first chapter, the first verse. Listen for God's Word. In the first book Theophilus I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning and to the day when he was taken up to heaven after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive by many convincing proofs appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the

kingdom of God. 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 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” So when they had come together, they asked him, “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, and all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this as they were watching he was lifted up on a cloud and taken out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 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.” This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A leadership transition is a critical and important time in the life of a congregation. It’s a time for reflection, looking back with gratitude, and in your case on a long and distinguished history here in this community during which you have grown and become strong and sturdy and capable of handling whatever presents itself – including this unexpected transition. It’s also a time for looking forward to a new and exciting future. And it’s very good that you are doing that intentionally with a participatory process that will help you become even stronger in the days ahead. For the moment it’s a time of waiting, a time of I suggest creative thinking about important issues, and so as I pondered as how best we might spend our time together, it occurred to me that it might be a good idea to look at the early Church – the Church that was being born in the decades after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. To think about the formative issues that that church had to struggle with and contend with. One of history’s great imponderables and improbabilities is how did this tiny movement that began in the remote backwaters of the Roman Empire and whose followers were mostly poor people – fishermen, slaves, social outcasts – in a relatively brief 300 years grow and spread and capture the imagination of and become the established religion of the vast Roman Empire. Libraries – literally, libraries – of books have been written about this. One historian (and I love this title) calls it *The Triumph of the Meek*. I propose that we look at

some examples from the primary source – a book written at the time a few decades after Jesus by a literate follower by the name of Luke. He wrote an account of Jesus’s brief three year ministry that bears his name *The Gospel According to Luke*.

But he also wrote a second volume that we know as the *Acts of the Apostles* – the first history of the early church. This exercise is a good idea, I think, for another reason and in a larger context as well because there is something going on in the church these days globally, but also in the United States of America. In our Presbyterian denominational corner of the Holy Catholic Church, it is called the *crisis of the mainline church in America*. Mainline defined as those churches that have been there since the beginning of the nation and before - churches that were brought to North America to the New World by the earliest settlers mainly from England and Scotland, and Ireland. Churches that were deeply a part of American culture through the War for Independence and the forming of a new nation, and a civil war, and two great global conflicts right up into the middle of the twentieth century.

And then mid- twentieth century something happened. The mainline church - that’s us - Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Congregational (now the United Church of Christ) – began a long slow decline in numerical strength and place in American culture. For several centuries we were at the center of things. Our churches were in every town and village – usually on the town square – we started most of the colleges and universities in the nation. Most presidents and most members of congress were Presbyterians or Episcopalians or Congregationalists. Our Presbyterian leaders consulted with presidents. We were in the news and on the cover of Time magazine. That has all changed in my lifetime – and in yours – and the reasons are many and complex, and they have to do with as much changes in American culture as they do with the church.

The late Phyllis Tickle (isn’t that a wonderful name?) – a very respected sociologist of religion – says that every 500 years the people of God experience a major upheaval all the way back to ancient Israel - Abraham and Sarah, Egyptian slavery and exodus, the monarchy and King David, the birth of Jesus, about 500

years apart. Five hundred years ago this year a major upheaval – the Protestant Reformation.

In her book, *The Great Emergence*, Professor Tickle calls it a ‘once every 500 years rummage sale.’ All the old and once viable but now obsolete stuff is hauled out of the attic and discarded or resold. Something like that happens here I’m told every year. And new stuff which now has breathing space and room to grow and deepen begins to emerge. That seems to be exactly what is happening to us at this moment in time. At the moment it can be unnerving and frightening. But I am encouraged by Phyllis Tickle’s observation that after the rummage sale a new institution emerges. After the Reformation, for instance, a whole new reality – the Protestant church, and in fact a renewed and stronger and reformed Roman Catholic Church now processing into history on two parallel tracks.

That’s our context here locally and as part of the larger church in the United States and the world. We are in the midst of an every 500 year upheaval – a rummage sale. So let’s look at how it was in the beginning. The text this morning from the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles – it is a few weeks after the trauma of Jesus’s death and resurrection. The disciples in this passage are with the risen Christ. They’re frightened, they’re mystified about what’s going to happen next, and so they ask a good question, “When will you finish this business? When will you reestablish the kingdom here in Israel? When will you come back again?”

People have been asking that question calculating, and sometimes fabricating answers ever since. In fact, the apocalypse – that’s what this is called – has become a cottage industry. The *Left Behind* series of books – novels about what happens when Jesus returns – who’s saved, who’s taken up, who’s raptured, and who is left behind – is a best-selling phenomenon. Every few years, it happened I think three or four years ago, someone announces that he or she has discovered when it’s going to happen. Inevitably a few people sell all their belongings, say good-bye to their friends and gather on a designated hillside to wait for the return of Jesus. We’re inclined to find a little humor in this but it’s actually very sad and always ends tragically.

It's constructive to pay attention to the story. When the disciples asked Jesus he tells them that no one knows the time and that it's not your business. More to the point you have plenty of business, you have plenty to do here on earth in this life here and now. And then comes the phenomenon we know as the ascension – the return of the risen Christ to the God who sent him and who lived and died and rose again in Him. We Presbyterians don't make much of the ascension. We say we believe it and the Apostles' Creed he suffered and was crucified dead and buried and descended into hell and rose again and ascended into heaven. Part of the reason we hurry on by the ascension is we can't seem to let go of incipient literalism - this does not fit with our scientific world view with what we know about what happens, and what does not happen in the world. And so I think we always need the reminder that Luke the writer and the other New Testament writers are not Associated Press reporters; Luke rather writing decades after the fact as more of an artist than a reporter. He's painting a picture to express a mystery in this case to assure those first beleaguered and about to be persecuted disciples that Jesus Christ did not just disappear into nothingness slowly vanishing from history and from memory, but is in fact with God, and reigns with God and is Lord of All. It was to give them hope and courage and strength and it did that.

And so the ascension is, in my mind, a very precious belief. Jesus Christ reigns and is the reality before and above all reality. He is the Lord, our Lord, his love which he lived and gave generously and poured into the world is not dead but is alive and is at work in the world - through the work of the church, by the way. It is what we have to offer when the bottom falls out; when a spouse of fifty years dies in the middle of the night; when a long awaited child is still born or born with special needs; when the test results are in and the lump is malignant; when the boss calls you in and you're downsized and unemployed; when you failed the exam and are rejected by the school you dreamed of attending – when the bottom falls out and the world seems out of control and certainties are gone, and securities and values disappearing in front of your eyes – we hold onto one another and we whisper, “Jesus Christ reigns and is Lord of All forever and ever.”

And in this interesting little text an amazing thing happens –two men in white robes show up. Men in white robes are usually angels in the Bible, so we'll call

them angels. Jesus is gone now and the men ask the disciples who are standing there stunned mysteriously in awe at what they've seen and maybe fear about what they're supposed to do next, and so the two men ask them this wonderful question, "Gentlemen, why are you standing there looking up into heaven?"

You know, there is a tendency in religion to do just that – to look up into heaven, or probably more realistically to look past to the good old days. What my first professor of religion in college used to call 'pie in the sky by and by' religion. Christianity has always been misinterpreted by those who would withdraw from the world and wait for Jesus to return. But it's also misunderstood by those who in the name of Jesus disdain the world; are suspicious of the world as a sinful dirty evil place, who use the word 'worldly' as a term of derision rather than a beautiful full bodied affirmation of God's amazing gift of the creation of this world, and everything in it – the sky and mountains and green grass and flowers on a beautiful June morning; of new born babies and little children and wise elderly - this very world of laughter and love and passion and ecstasy. Jesus is seriously misunderstood. For those who conclude that following him has nothing to do with this world, with politics and economics, the environment, and the way people are treated. Jesus who lived so thoroughly in this world that he was accused, and convicted and executed as an enemy of the state.

It is this world God created and called good and loves enough to send his only son into it, to live in it, to walk its dusty roads, to love his friends and family and his people and his nation – to love it all so much he was willing to die for it – ours a most authentic life, yours and mine. The life God calls us to live is here and amidst of all this – all this messiness and beauty, all this sin but also unselfishness – all this injustice but occasional beautiful intrusions of justice, all this tragedy but also profound joyfulness. It's a good question – 'why are you standing there looking up?' Here, this world is where the action is. Here in this world is where God calls you to live, to be the people of Jesus Christ – God's people – to be the church. Why are you standing there looking up? There's work to do here for you, in this community. Your life is down here. All the people you love are down here. Your most authentic life will be lived down here in the midst of the world.

One of my heroes is the late Don Benedict. Don was the Director of the Old Chicago City Missionary Society, an urban ministry that focused its work on the powerless – the voiceless poor who lived without much by way of kindness and justice and hope. Don was not a big man, but he was absolutely fearless and stirred up a lot of trouble in Chicago a couple decades ago, and was roundly criticized – most roundly criticized – not by politicians, but by Christian people whose religion was otherworldly and who were content with ‘pie in the sky by and by’ religion – a religion that had little or nothing to say about what was going on in the city, and the nation and the world. Don used to say that the mission of the urban church is to keep alive the rumor that there is a God.

I’ve come to understand that as the mission statement for the whole church of Jesus Christ – for churches everywhere in American culture. It is why you are here to remind the world this unique community that there is a God – a God who came among us in Jesus Christ – a God who loves the world and everything and everyone in it with an everlasting love that will never ever give up on the world, or with you or me or anyone; a God who very much cares about how people are treated in this world; a God who intends justice and peace to prevail, and kindness and generosity to characterize human relationships; a God who blesses every single human being with dignity and value, and with love; a God who has been remembered and worshiped and followed here on this spot for more than a century and a half, and will continue, I know to be worshipped and served, and followed here in this community, this world for all the years to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.