

Why Gaze Into Space?

Acts 1:1-14

Crossroads Christian Church

John 17:1-11

June 1, 2014 Easter 7A/Ascension

Over the past 2000 years, one thing has been constant. There are always people predicting the Second Coming will happen right away. It happened a lot around the change of the Millennium, and it got a lot of publicity 3 years ago when a radio evangelist, the Rev. Harold Camping, predicted the coming for May 11 of that year. He died a few weeks ago, still abjectly sorry for all the people he had unwittingly deluded into selling their possessions. People who think that the Bible is an elaborate code book that if you just tweak it right don't really understand the Bible. At least they don't understand the part where Jesus said that no one, not even he, would know the time—and who are we to try to outsmart Jesus?

Anyway, after all those times when so many credulous people gaze off into the sky to watch for Jesus' second coming, our scripture for today is about a smaller group of people who watched Jesus' second going. What do I mean by that? No matter how many times during his ministry that Jesus told his disciples that he would suffer and die and rise again, they couldn't comprehend. No matter how long he taught them in the Upper Room, as we heard from John 17, they didn't want to accept it. He was the Messiah, after all, wasn't he? How could such things happen? How could God let his own Son and their dear friend down like that? But it did happen. Jesus was arrested. He was tried. He was condemned. He was tortured. He was executed. That was his first going. Jesus was dead.

Then came Easter! Nothing had made sense before in their fear and grief, and at first, nothing made sense about the empty tomb. They jumped to other explanations. Soldiers or someone else had stolen the body. They were seeing

ghosts; or they were being deluded. But time after time, they encountered the Risen Christ, different but still fully human, still carrying the nail marks in his hands, the spear wound in his side. He was alive! He was with them again! But he told them that the time would come when he would physically leave them again. The world would see him no more, because he would return to God, but his Spirit would remain with them wherever they went. That's why I called this the story of the Second Going. The first was the separation by death. The second was the separation of Glory.

The Second Going, the Ascension, doesn't get much play in the church. It gets lost between the wonders of the Easter resurrection and the giving of the Spirit to the church at Pentecost. But it's a beautiful and important event, which completes the story of Jesus Christ's earthly life. Think. How would you react if you were the disciples of a crucified carpenter who had come back to life and was now taken up into glory before your very eyes? Like Jacob dreaming of the ladder to heaven at Bethel, like Moses before the burning bush, like Isaiah seeing the Lord God high and lifted up in the temple at Jerusalem, like Peter, James, and John seeing their Christ transfigured on a mountaintop before they set their faces toward Jerusalem, like Mary at the tomb when the one she thought was the gardener turned out to be the Risen Lord, so now the followers of Jesus had come to a holy moment; a transforming moment; a moment so terrifying and awe-inspiring that they were paralyzed, mouths agape, staring up into the sky. They had seen the power and the glory of God at work, and they would never, ever be the same again. All those things that they had heard before from Jesus that had never made sense—things about suffering and dying, and rising from the dead, and returning in glory to God the Father—all those made sense now. Human beings had thrown all the inhuman, terrible, arrogant, self-righteous, self-serving hate they could throw at Jesus Christ

on the cross. God's answer was the open tomb and the risen Lord. All the hate in the world could not conquer the love of God. And now the agent of that love had returned to glory.

So now what? What would lie ahead? Would this be the end of the world? Would God's heavenly rule come in glory? Would the legions of Caesar be overwhelmed by legions of angels? What would God's next move be?

Jesus Christ had just promised them that God's next move would be through them—that they, the disciples, now apostles, would carry the good news that the Messiah had come, that God had conquered hate, fear, and evil, from near to far. They would start in Jerusalem and spread into Judea, then Samaria next door, then to the ends of the earth. That's where we are, by the way, from their perspective—the ends of the earth, when you start from Jerusalem. Jesus said that they, his followers, would be his witnesses; then he was gone in a cloud of glory and light. And there they stood—captured by the moment. Transfixed by the strange power of God's love for our little world. Their reverie was interrupted by an angel, who would send them down to earth in a hurry. An angel, a messenger from God, asked them why they were all standing around gazing into space. The show's over, my friends. Move along. There's nothing to see here anymore. The Living Christ is with the Living God; yet he is still with you, inside you. Now get on with it. Share the good news. Get busy. There's a sad and terrified world out there waiting, and you're wasting time.

Angels have a way of coming down from heaven to bring us back to earth. Instead of delivering mystical truths that lift us above the world, they send us right back into it. They say, "Go and do." "Get on with it." What did the angel tell Mary? "You will bear a son." What did the angel tell Joseph? "Don't be afraid or embarrassed to take Mary as your wife. The child she will bear is holy." What did the angels tell the shepherds? "Go to Bethlehem and see." What did the angel tell the Holy

Family when Herod's storm troopers were on the way? "Flee to Egypt." What did the angel tell the grieving woman at the tomb of Jesus? "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Go and tell the disciples that he has risen and gone before you."

Later, some apostles of Christ would be thrown into jail. When an earthquake would shake up the place and open all the cell doors, an angel told the apostles to go and release the others. That's what angels do. They giving us messages from God—and not just messages, marching orders. "Go and do. Witness and serve."

Sometimes we have mountaintop faith experiences—maybe at church camp or Quadrennial, at a moving worship service at a General Assembly, and we want to cherish the moment. We feel a little bit like the disciples, that our lives have changed, because we have experienced the touch of God's presence in our lives. We want to hold fast to the moment and not go on with the nitty-gritty of life. We don't want to go from the mountaintop to the desktop or the stovetop. We experience what psychologists call a re-entry problem. But we get gently nudged back into reality, and are called to live faithfully.

Faith, you see, isn't a matter of withdrawing from the world, or hoping that the world is soon coming to an end. That's in God's hands, and we should trust God. Faith is responding to the Risen Christ who is in charge right now. Faith is creatively loving others and serving in Christ's name at the same old work station or volunteer task or family setting. We are called to serve and witness, because we know that the Christ who went up to heaven is still the same Christ who is with us today. It's the same thing that we say at the communion table each Sunday—Christ died, Christ arose, Christ is with us always. That same Christ is with us today, calling us to mission, and promising us, "Lo, I am with you always." Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon