



# “What Are You Looking At?”

Text: Acts 1:1-11

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

The Ascension of the Lord has never been all that an important event on the church calendar. For one thing, the fortieth day after Easter falls on a weekday, so the possibility of celebrating on the actual day is a fool-hearty exercise. Who would show up?

Then there are the astrophysical aspects of the story. As a rule, people do not simply float away into the sky. Just think of the nightmare that would pose for the good people at the TSA.

The very telling of the story presents an understanding of the universe that we simply know not to be accurate. The universe of Jesus' time was understood to be a three-tiered affair with heaven as being “up,” hell being “down,” and the earth in the “middle,” with the sun and moon orbiting the earth. Now, even most of the political types who refuse to accept the witness of science will still agree that that view of the universe isn't quite right.

So, from the outset, we have to accept that a literal reading of this story isn't going to prove helpful.

Still, there are other stories of ascensions and assumptions that appear in both sacred and secular writings. Elijah is taken up into the heavens on a chariot of fire. We are told that Enoch “walked with God and was no more, for God took him.” Plutarch, the ancient historian, included an ascension story in his history of Rome. So, such stories are not unprecedented.

But what are these stories trying to tell us?

Very often ascension stories serve to provide a new and exalted status to the one who ascended. Elijah does not die, but ascends to God and is exalted to a place second only to Moses. To this day, Elijah holds a special and honored place in Judaism.

Who appears to Moses on the Mount of the Transfiguration with Jesus? Moses and Elijah. Elijah's presence and influence continued and continues.

So, to say with the Creed, that Jesus "ascended into heaven" and is "seated at the right hand of God," is one way of saying that Jesus is now exalted over all – the Lord of earth and heaven – God's chosen One – who heals the wounds of a broken humanity and breaks down the walls that divide us from each other and from God.

This is the first reason we mark the day. It is a celebration of that very first creed of the Church: "Jesus is Lord."

But, and this is the second reason, the Ascension also marks a critical turning point. In Luke's gospel – the first of his two-book work, Luke concludes his telling of the Jesus story with these words:

The Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

- Luke 24:50-53

That's the end of Luke's gospel.

When you go to Acts – the second volume of Luke's work – you get a longer and quite different story. Jesus has something to say to the disciples. After three years of discipleship, after witnessing the crucifixion and resurrection, and after 40 days of instruction and teaching, Jesus will no longer be present with the disciples in the same way. This part of the story has come to an end.

However, in this ending, there is a new beginning.

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. – Acts 1:8

Luke's story of Jesus has come to an end. Luke's story of the church has just begun.

The message and mission of Jesus is now passed on to Jesus' disciples. Jesus has taught them, shown them, and lived that message and mission with them. What is to become of his story and his work is now in their care and keeping. The promised gift of the Holy Spirit has yet to be given and received. (That's for next Sunday.) They are instructed to wait for the Spirit's empowering presence. But what is to become of the work for which Jesus lived and died is in their hands.

And then comes this rather comical scene. The disciples are standing there, first looking at Jesus ascending and then, presumably, at the clouds. They are standing there, looking at the sky. And then, Luke tells us:

“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.”

– Acts 1:10-11

If the angels had been from Evansville, they would have said, “What are you looking at?” Oh, we’re just looking at the sky. Why? We’re really not sure. Don’t you think you ought to get on with what he told you to do? Guess so.

And there is the great challenge the church has always faced. It is the challenge believers continue to face. Adoration? Or action? Worship? Or service? Contemplation? Or engagement?

Let’s be clear from the outset: it’s not a choice between the two. Both are part of life as a Christian. One feeds the other. But let us also accept this certain truth: Just as the message and mission of Jesus was entrusted to the disciples long ago, the message and mission of Jesus has been entrusted to the disciples of here and now.

Recent studies of the church have been disheartening. We are told that young people are not religious and are not choosing to be a part of the church. We are seeing congregations merging or being closed. Even the exalted mega-church movement seems to be falling on hard times.

Ask the question: why? Why is this the case? Why is the church having such a hard time?

Consider the story of the Presbyterian Church in just my lifetime and I’ll be 60 in December. First, we fought about Angela Davis. If you don’t know that part of the story, consider it a blessing. Then, we fought about the Confession of 1967. Then, we fought about the divinity of Jesus Christ. Then, we fought about the role of women in the church. And then, we spent forty years fighting about who God could love and who we could love. And those are just the major battles. There were other skirmishes along the way.

Who wants to be part of a group that spends decades fighting? Not many people and the ones that do are usually only interested in continuing the fight. And not many younger people are interested in fighting.

But over that same 60 years, when we Presbyterians have been at our best, we have seen great accomplishments. We were on the right side of history in the struggle for civil rights for all. We were on the right side of history as we understood the importance of helping people to be housed and fed and clothed and educated before we engaged with them about matters of faith. We were on the right side of history when, 50 years ago, we began talking about caring for the environment. We were on the right side of history when we took the risks of talking about a politic based on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we are a bit like those first disciples, standing there with our feet on the ground and our heads in the clouds. We get a little distracted. We get a little preoccupied. We get a little sidetracked.

And then, someone or something says, “What are you looking at?” And that is a moment of grace. It is a moment that allows us to re-examine our calling and our discipleship.

And we are – right now – in such a moment of grace. We are, this very moment, at a time when people will offer an open eye and an open ear to those who are authentically serving Jesus Christ. This is a moment when the good news of God’s love can be heard and received in new and life-giving ways.

So, it’s up to us. We can be so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good. Or we can be about the work of expanding the Kingdom of God. “What are you looking at?” How about a world made new? How about a world where there’s enough for all? How about a world where quarreling and fighting are no more?

We have good news to share. “What are you looking at?”  
For now and evermore. Amen.



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