

“Staring at the heavens”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
May 24, 2020

Acts 1:6-14

by Rev. Patrick Heery

For the second time, they were afraid. The disciples had already lost Jesus once, and it had near broken them. Then, by some miracle, he came back. For 40 days, they sat with him, learning and talking. For 40 days, they stared at him, taking courage from his smile, feeling hope—so nearly lost—bloom inside of them. For 40 days, they were happy. They felt the strength of his love, and because of it, they thought they could do anything. And then... he left. He left! Though Jesus had promised that he would be with them in Spirit, that God would plant power in them, I’m sure it felt—at least for a moment—like they were suddenly on their own. Disciples without a teacher. And they were afraid.

Remember that, other than his family, none of them had been with Jesus longer than three years. To put that into perspective, I’ve been the pastor of Westminster for four years. Or even better perspective: I had eight years of higher education and rigorous training before I was ordained as a pastor. Eight years! And it still didn’t feel like enough. There are lots of days when I think to myself: I really have no idea what I’m doing. The disciples had three years, at best. And that was before the resurrection; after, they got 40 days. That’s shorter than this quarantine! Now, Jesus has told them that their work is not finished; they are to be his witnesses, not just in their own country, but “to the ends of the earth.” He’s just told them that his legacy, his teachings, his work of love and justice, the good news of his resurrection, it all now rests on their shoulders.

With that, he ascends to heaven, rising beyond the clouds, till they can see him no more. What do the disciples do next? Witness to Jesus? No. They stare at the heavens... thinking, “Um, come back? Where are you going? You can’t just start this party and leave!” (You know, if by “party,” we mean an all-demanding counter-cultural movement that results in people trying to kill you... Wooh... party...)

The disciples look up in contemplation, because the heavens feel a lot safer than the world. Abstract reflection has always felt safer. When they were with Jesus, they were constantly bringing to him their debates. When Jesus died, they (the men) hid themselves in a locked house to “pray.” When Jesus was resurrected, they asked him to prognosticate on the timing of the apocalypse. When Jesus ascended, they stared at the heavens, pondering when he would return.

The religious authorities did the same thing. While Jesus was out there, standing with the marginalized, healing people, overturning tables, calling disciples, preaching love, the religious authorities were trying to trap him in theological debates about fasting, and Sabbath, and eternal life.

On Ascension Sunday, it’s easy for us to do the same thing; easy to disregard what Jesus says about discipleship and focus instead on esoteric questions such as: “Did Jesus literally ascend to

heaven? How did that happen?” But Jesus didn’t command the disciples to ponder his ascension; he commanded them to get to work.

The two men in white robes, thus, ask the disciples why they’re staring at the heavens. They might ask us the same. A lot of us, and this includes me, we’re good at talking, pondering, learning, debating. We love our forums and study groups and book clubs. We love worship and prayer, and meeting God on mountaintops. This is part of what makes the Presbyterian tradition special. We emphasize the life of the mind.

Good for us! God calls us to be mindful, and God knows our culture could use a little more intelligence right now. Indeed, Jesus has just spent 40 days with the disciples, praying, teaching, discussing. The problem isn’t with the heavens. The problem is when we stare at them, divorce them from the earth, from the human, from the practical. The problem is when we talk but don’t act, look but don’t walk.

It’s when, for instance, we talk about the nuances of white privilege and racism in adult forums; we host panels and discussion groups, and read books. We post signs about our inclusive welcome, and listen as our pastor pontificates. And we feel proud of ourselves for our commitment to diversity and justice. As we should! There are very few other churches in Auburn talking about any of that. But how many of us have acted upon those discussions?

Have we made a point of seeking out non-white spaces and building real relationships with people of color? Have we altered where we live or shop? Have we worshiped at historic African American churches? Have we gone to the annual Martin Luther King Jr. celebration, or Juneteenth, or the Harriet Tubman remembrances, or the many artistic events led by people of color? Have we protested and declared that Black Lives Matter? Have we talked with our friends about privilege and supremacy, calling them out when necessary? Have we tried to change how we exist in the world? Have we called for justice for Ahmaud Arbery?

Has our church examined and transformed its leadership, worship, and identity, such that it actually is a space where people of color are safe, welcome, and empowered?

We could ask the same questions about our faith, or the environment, or poverty, or love. It’s not about feeling guilty. We all do this; the disciples—hand picked by Jesus—did it. We do it because action is hard. It’s easier to stare at the heavens rather than roll up our sleeves and begin the vulnerable work of ministering as complicated, imperfect people among other complicated, imperfect people, in complicated, imperfect situations. Like the disciples who were afraid, we settle into the safety of the intellectual. It’s cleaner, less emotional, less messy, less demanding of life change and action.

It’s also, however, far less fulfilling. Those men draped in white do not question the gaze of the disciples in order to rebuke them, but rather to redirect them. To redirect them from empty skies to a world pulsing with beautiful, dangerous life; a world of people waiting for love; a world of prisons waiting to be smashed, hunger waiting to be filled, dreams waiting to be born, and, yes, minds waiting to be opened; a world that needs to know that resurrection is more than an idea, justice is more than an idea, God is more than an idea—they are flesh and blood.

This work, these relationships, it's what Jesus had with his disciples. They may not have understood him; they may have frustrated, annoyed, and abandoned him; but he loved them, and they loved him. They got to share this road together, to laugh and cry and live this crazy life together. They peeled back the veil of this existence and saw divinity in the person standing next to them.

Staring at the heavens may be safe, but walking out into the muck to witness to the kingdom of God, that's resurrection. We're all so desperate for purpose, for joy, for the holy. And it's right in front of us. Love somebody! Stand shoulder to shoulder with someone who's fighting for their right to breathe. Break bread with a stranger at a soup kitchen. Worship God in a prison. Kneel at the side of a hospital bed. Sit with someone who is angry. Tell people why you believe. Dare a moment of vulnerability. Hand your microphone to someone who has been silenced.

Jesus never says it will be easy, but he does promise that it will heal us.

Moreover, he says that we won't do it alone. Jesus promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, God in us. "I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus said, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:18-20, 27).

When we think we do not have any more to give, when we think we could not possibly offer anything to the world, when we are scared and tempted to hide in the abstract, that is when a strength that is not our own bubbles up inside of us; that is when others link arms with us and carry us; that is when grace becomes the ground upon which we stand.

God doesn't need us to do it all. God doesn't need us to do it perfectly. But God does need us to do it. To be witnesses.

It's time to combine heaven and earth, intellect and action—to bring the forum into the streets. It's time to get to work. **Amen.**