

“Earth Looking”

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Text: Acts 1:6-14

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I know that many of you have looked up at the heavens. One of my passions is astronomy. I got hooked when I was in the eighth grade and we went out one night and looked through a small telescope. Ever since then I have been fascinated with the night skies.

Several years ago I purchased an eight-inch Casagram telescope. A professor of astronomy in Maryville, Missouri taught me how to use the scope and rekindled my love for the stars. Some of you know the thrill of seeing galaxies, planets, the moon, and so forth. I can spend hours just looking up. When I do I lose track of time. It is engaging to look up.

Yet, we should not spend our life just looking up. We should not spend our lives just reflecting, or thinking, or praying, or meditating, or whatever. At some point we have to become reengaged in life---interact with others---eat---sleep---and so forth.

Our text today comes from the Letter of Acts sometimes referred to as the “Acts of the Apostles”.

Acts was written for the purpose of consolidating the faith communities who by the time of the writing were exhibiting many divisions. Acts was an apology for Christianity addressed to Theophilus. Theophilus most likely was a socially prominent believer. He was most likely of Greek background and at some point converted to Judaism and then expressed an interest about Jesus.¹

¹ The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, (Abingdon Press, 2002), Vol. X, by Robert Wall, p. 7-8.

Here Jesus instructs the disciples on the Kingdom of God but does not define what that kingdom will be. Jesus also gives no indication as to when that kingdom will happen. This is something that still frustrates some persons. There seem to always be some who want to pin a definitive time on the coming of the kingdom. They spend their lives trying to unlock what they believe is a code within scripture. This is just another form of heaven-gazing. Here, Luke says that no one will know the time but then says that Jesus goes on to assure the disciples that the kingdom will prevail no matter what happens.

The part of the text I want to focus on is a couple of verses. I will share from the translation The Message. This is just after Jesus has ascended into the heavens. Two men suddenly appear as the disciples are gazing up into heaven and say, *“You Galileans—why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken from among you to heaven will come as certainly---and mysteriously as he left. So they (the disciples) left the mountain called Olives and returned to Jerusalem. It was a little over half a mile. They went to the upper room they had been using as a meeting place.”*

When Luke wrote Acts he was writing to a very different kind of church than the church of the text. The church of Luke’s time had already witnessed the total destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the city of Jerusalem. This is the church in which Paul, a Jew who followed the teaching of the Jew Jesus had radically extended the welcome of the Jewish church to include Gentiles. This was a church that had already witnessed localized persecutions at the hands of Rome. This was a church that was already experiencing division over various theological understandings. Was Luke trying to tell

the church something? Was the church too focused on the return of Jesus to the point that they were losing the moment before them? Was some of the church wandering from faith because the dynamic proclamation of many including Paul predicted the return of Jesus in their generation? So they waited and when it did not happen some were wandering away from faith. We can never really know. Yet, today as we look at our church experience we can surmise that maybe some of this was true.

Gazing at heaven is not unhealthy unless it is all we do. In truth spiritual reflection, meditation, contemplation is important disciplines in the spiritual life. Yet, anything done in the extreme can become counterproductive.

The implication of the passage is that after Jesus ascended the disciples stood there waiting for his return. That was not going to happen anytime soon. So they are admonished to stop gazing at heaven. So what do they do? They return to Jerusalem and hole up in the upper room. It would take an outpouring of the spirit to dislodge them from their hiding place to burst into the world.

Today many expend a great deal of energy on trying to predict the end of the age. It is a waste of time and energy. Many cloister themselves away from the world attempting to be a pure oasis untouched by the world. It is a futile and counterproductive process. Many spend enormous amounts of time studying an issue, meeting in committees to discuss an issue, formulating wonderful slogans and policies about an issue and never actually roll up their sleeves and engage the issue. We spend our time gazing into heaven and really never deal with the reality in front of us. But reality has a habit of crashing into life.

“An elderly man lay dying in his bed. He spent these hours reflecting and praying. In death’s agony he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookies wafting up the stairs. He gathered his remaining strength, and lifted himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made this way out of the bedroom, and with even greater effort forced himself down the stairs, gripping the railing with both hands. With labored breath he leaned against the door frame gazing into the kitchen. There in the kitchen he saw on the waxed paper on the kitchen table, spread out, were literally hundreds of chocolate chip cookies. Was he in heaven? Or was this one final heroic act of love from his devoted wife? Summoning his strength he threw himself toward the table, landing on his knees in a rumped position. He reached out and took a cookie that tasted so wonderful as the chocolate melted on his parched tongue that he suddenly felt alive again. As he reached for another his hand was suddenly smacked back by his wife. “Leave those alone,” she said, “Those are for your funeral.”

Sometimes gazing into heaven, planning for the future is healthy. Studying, contemplating are all good things. But at some point all of us must reengage back into the realities of life. ***Luke reminds us that our focus must be in the life around us. It is in this life that the gospel is lived out and shared.***

CHURCH LIFE IS MESSY BUT IT IS WHERE FAITH HITS THE ROAD.
Real life is messy but that is where the gospel is lived out.

I remember my first taste of church reality shortly after arriving at my first call. During seminary we had time to do a lot of heaven gazing. For me study and debate and writing papers and researching ideas were and are exciting. It was exciting to spend three

years in the study of theology, psychology, ethics, history, the Bible, Greek, missions, and a host of other courses.

When I graduated I was ready to take on the world—to educate people about the scriptures---to enable them to cope with life’s struggles---and to lead the church in evangelism and justice.

So what was the first controversy that confronted me? Was it racism? Was it the conflict between conservative and liberal interpretations of the bible? It was none of these. My first conflict was what kind of cup to use at the fellowship hour. I have shared this story before but it illustrates my point so well it bears repeating.

The particular congregation I was serving was a conflicted church. I believed that one solution was to spend more time together around coffee and cookies. So I suggested that we have a coffee-fellowship hour after worship. The idea was accepted and we set about planning the event. We decided that each Sunday school class and fellowship group would host a different week.

The first indication of conflict came when an older member came into my office furious at the younger members. The young-adult class (now this was in 1974 so those young adults are now our more mature persons)----the young adult class had used the “new” Styrofoam cups for the coffee fellowship. “We have wonderful china tea cups, a tea and coffee service, and beautiful plates and they used those new fangled cups,” the member intoned. I made a stab at explaining why they had used the Styrofoam cups by saying, “Well many of the young adults are busy and don’t have the time to wash all those cups by hand so they used cups that could be thrown away.”

“That’s just the problem with that younger generation,” the member said with emotion---“these younger people are lazy and have no sense of properness and just want everything easy, easy, easy.” I discovered that there was no way to convince this older member who was an adult in the Great Depression and for whom the china cups represented a great gift to the church that the younger members were not lazy and unfaithful.

I had the same problem with the so-called younger generation. They were furious that the older members never wanted to change anything or try anything new. The Styrofoam cups represented the very best of American progress and so why not use them in church.

I attempted a compromise suggesting that each group in charge could use what they wanted. BAD IDEA!!!! It did not work as each group wanted a resolution from the Board declaring a definitive policy. Thus the idea to bring the church together resulted in a fight over Styrofoam versus china cups.

For me I was in shock---literally. This was not a fight over biblical truth, or justice, or whatever---this was a fight over the kind of cups to use in a fellowship time.

Some time later the two former ministers of the church who both lived in the community, A.N. Hinrichson and Harry Headley, noticed that I seemed to be less than enthusiastic. As I explained my situation they just smiled. They both said that this is where faith is lived---in the messy things of church. They both helped me then and at other times translate the theories and affirmations of seminary into the realities of life. They helped me to move my gaze from heaven to the realities of life.

Ironically in today's church where we use Styrofoam cups the younger generations often are critical of such use and are suggesting or demanding that "real" cups be used because of environmental issues. The fight goes on and on and on.

Both of these gentlemen, former pastors, were not unlike the two men who talked to the disciples. They helped me to move my gaze from heaven to life. These gentlemen, my mentors, remained friends until their deaths.

There is nothing wrong with heaven gazing. In some cases we may need more heaven gazing and a little less engagement in life. Yet, Luke sets the tone---the heaven gazing or the cloistering in an upper room must lead to engagement in the real world. It is in the real world of injustice, poverty, high gas prices, imperfect people---it is in the real world of Styrofoam and china cups that faith is lived out. It is lived out in the building of home in Mexico, the sorting of clothes in a thrift shop, the welcome given to a stranger, the lesson prepared and delivered. This is where the gospel becomes real---in the church---in you and me.

My friend A.N. Hinrichson was a product of another age. He loved reading Shakespeare and writing poetry. I share one of his poems from one of the angels who helped me to move from heaven gazing to earth living as a closing.

(Read selection from his book). Amen.