



## “Life in the Spirit: Look Around”

Acts 1:6-14

May 16, 2021

Anticipation was high. Expectations were grandiose. Forty days had passed since that glorious Easter morning. Jesus has been teaching and preaching in Jerusalem. His movement has grown and diversified. And, in the scene described in this morning’s story, the disciples have all gathered together, anxiously waiting to see what was next. They knew the significance of the number forty in the Biblical tradition—a symbol for the waiting period before God’s next move. What about now? Would the kingdom of God come down? Would the streets be paved with gold? Would there be an end to violence and cruelty? Would the disciples get to wear crowns? Their minds must have been racing as Jesus gathered them together. With wide eyes, they choose this question: *is this* the time when you will restore the kingdom?

Jesus’ response, mysterious and unclear, must have been disappointing for the disciples. The time, he says, is not for you to know. Instead, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will be with them in this *in between* time. He declares that they will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

And then he leaves. He just disappears into heaven. I realized this week that I have always imagined the ascension of Jesus as one of the most visually stunning and dramatic moments in all of the New Testament. I think it started with a picture in my Children’s Bible. Jesus, dressed in a radiant robe, ascending into the clouds, halo around his head, heavenly light shining all around, bursting from his fingers and toes. The disciples, showered in holiness, standing below with their arms outstretched, knowing smiles on all their faces.

It may have happened exactly that way—as beautiful and awe-inspiring as the window above my head. But I do feel a responsibility to report to you, after having read the account in Acts in search of such a scene, that none of those details colorfully illustrated in my Bible appear in the text. Luke simply reports that Jesus “was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Barbara Brown Taylor describes it this way: “one moment he was there with them and the next moment he was gone, his well-

known hand raised in final blessing, his face grown bright and indistinct, his familiar shape vanishing into the fog like the end of a dream too good to be true—all of it slipping out of their reach until he was no longer there for them, no longer present but past, a memory that would haunt them to the end of their days.”

They are so taken aback that they have no reply when two white-robed men appear on the scene and ask them the question that is really at the heart of this story, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Before it was metaphysical debate, orthodox doctrine, stained glass, or watercolor painting, the ascension of Jesus was an experience of absence, a painful parting, the loss of a loved one. Maybe we need a new window to show that part of the scene. Just us, still waiting, watching the sky for some sign that he’ll be back soon.

Have you been there? In the disciple’s shoes, watching Jesus disappear behind the clouds. Have you watched as your hope faded into the distance? Have you whispered to God that simple question, “Where are you?” The disciples gazed up toward heaven. “Where are you?”

A couple of summers ago, driving down a country road in Missouri, I saw a small white church building with a sign out front that read, “When life is too much to bear, just look up, he’s always there.” Is it really that simple? Does this sentimental soundbite do justice to the complexities of our lives? I don’t think so. There is a simplistic reductionism in these platitudes that fails to recognize the depth of pain that we humans do experience. Of all people, Christians ought to be the most honest about the reality of evil and suffering in the world. Instead, too often we echo culture’s denial of suffering or embarrassment at struggle, shouting greeting card affirmations above the din of our real-world experiences. “Just look up; he’s always there.” Well, recite that tender creed to the disciples who are staring into the sky where the source of their hope has just disappeared behind the clouds. Recite it to the grieving mother of a lost child. Recite it to those who suffer from depression. Recite to

victims of abuse. Recite it to anyone who has known what it is like to wake up in the middle of the night filled with fear at what tomorrow may bring. It's just not that simple.

Ironically, the question asked by the divine messengers contradicts the wisdom of the church billboard. The two men in white robes ask the disciples, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

The disciples' answer to the question is not given. Perhaps it was too heartbreaking for Luke to record. A day of expectation had turned into disappointment; the source of their hope was gone. Luke records no words. What comes next is a series of foundational moments for the Church. The disciples return to Jerusalem. And there these disciples did something so courageous and monumental that Luke takes the time to call them by name. Here's what they did. They devoted themselves to prayer, communal gathering, Scripture reading, and ministry to the poor and outcast. In other words, amid their confusion and fear and grief, they started looking around, finding their ministry. Jesus has promised that they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit. In the meantime, the disciples must tend to the ordinary tasks ahead of them, even when it seems hopeless, even when clouds block the sun. When life seems too much to bear, the disciples don't look up, they look around, and there they find their ministry.

With millions of others around the country, our family caught *Hamilton* fever last summer when Lin Manuel Miranda's hit musical was released on Disney+. All you have to do is walk up to our seven-year-old and say, "Pardon me, are you Aaron Burr, sir..." and the entire opening dialogue will pour out. We watched it for the first time, appropriately, on the Fourth of July. I loved the recasting of our nation's founders as a passionate collection of imperfect messengers for an idea, always imperfectly enacted and often willfully denied, that has nevertheless inspired, challenged, provoked, and prodded for a nation for centuries. In particular, I was struck by a line sung by Eliza Schuyler and repeated throughout the show—"Look around, look around, at how lucky we are to be alive right now." It's a strange sentiment spoken in the context of cascading tumult, bloody war, tragic loss, economic trauma, and personal pain. The line also takes on an air of dramatic irony given that we know how the story ends—Hamilton the unlucky one in his famous duel with Burr. And yet, Eliza looks around and confidently claims that fortune has smiled

on her generation. Look around. We're lucky to be alive right now. I first heard the words in a time of cascading loss of every kind—lives taken by an uncontrolled virus and acts of hate-filled abuse, businesses shuttered and food pantry lines growing by the day, a growing distrust of one another that culminated in both threats and acts of violence. When we looked around last summer, it was hard to see ourselves as lucky. Many of us found ourselves looking up wondering where our hope had gone. But these are not the only stories of the last year. In disruption and devastation, many found purpose. I remember a neighbor who put up signs in the area with her cell phone number and a message that said, "If anyone needs help with grocery or prescription pick-ups, call me. We're in this together." We discovered what makes work essential and, in the church, we found a clarity of mission in serving our neighbors in deepest need, repenting of our ignorance, and listening to the stories of those unlike us. In other words, we looked around and found our ministry. Perhaps we discovered that we were lucky to be alive right now not because all was right with the world but because we'd been given a chance to do it differently. To Begin Again.

The prophet Jeremiah was writing to a community of faith exiled in Babylon. Their hope had faded and they were looking up, asking God what they had done to deserve such punishment. Their temple, the place where they met and worshipped God, had been completely destroyed. They were despondent. But the prophet realigns their vision. Seek the welfare of the place where you are. Don't gaze up toward heaven. Look around. Be the community of faith in this place, even in the midst of exile. And, though you may not know exactly when you can trust that faith and hope will return. And when they do, well, I can't say it any better than Jeremiah:

"Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, I will let you find me, says the Lord, I will restore you and gather you in, I will bring you back into my presence." Those days are surely coming when we will look up and see the kingdom. Until then, here's where to look: for the presence of God in unexpected places, for the Spirit moving to make the mundane extraordinary and the old new again. Look around and find the place where God is calling you to serve and love and change and grow and follow. All around us. In every direction. I remember reading the work of missiologist David Bosch in seminary and being

struck by this insight: “It is not so much that God has a mission for the church in the world, but that God has a church for God’s mission in the world.” When we look around, we find that the Church is not the end of God’s plan for the world but rather the means of God’s mission for us and the world—these eleven abandoned disciples launched a movement by looking around. They become braver than they had been, wiser too. We’re still at it.

The ascension of Jesus is not the final chapter, not the end of the story. What do you do in the meantime, before the Spirit comes? What do you do when you aren’t sure what you believe about this sometimes invisible God? How do you respond when sadness and pain overwhelm you? What do you do when the world around you is crumbling and the hope you had is fading into the distance?

Perhaps you look around. You wake up and you get out of bed and you gaze out the window. Still cloudy? Maybe the sun will return tomorrow, but you must live today. You do your best to see the holy in the ordinary. You try hard to breathe even in the most painful moments. You treat those around you gently and with respect. You tend to the essential tasks: prayer, Scripture, community, and care of others. You look around because that is where you are most likely to find the One who has ascended. What do we see when we look around?

Perhaps we read of the disturbing proficiency gaps in our area schools and we sense a call to get involved in tutoring, mentoring, and advocating.

Or we listen to the stories of those whose lives lack purpose beyond fleeting success and we witness to the power of a God-given call to serve.

Perhaps we see the pernicious generational cycle of poverty, hunger, and homelessness and join our efforts with others to provide food and housing to our neighbors in need.

We hear the cries of those whose children, siblings, parents, friends have become victims of violence on our streets and we raise our voices in a collective cry of “no more.”

Maybe we open eyes and hearts to the isolated, the grieving, the lonely, the hurting, and we find our mission in small acts of great kindness that bear one another’s burdens in palpable ways.

You see, when we look around we can’t ignore that many in our literal midst are suffering or, to use another of Miranda’s powerful phrases from *Hamilton*, “going

through the unimaginable.” And then, if we are compelled by the words of Jesus and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, we claim our call as God’s witnesses to a different way.

For it is in communities of faith that we learn to shift our vision from empty skies and instead to see, really see, other people. It is in communities of faith that we are strengthened and equipped. And it is in communities of faith, turning our attention to others, that we will get glimpses of the One we long for, and we will know that we are not alone.

Do you miss him sometimes? Do you ache to hear that you haven’t been left behind? Then why do you stand looking up to heaven? Look out and see a world of beauty and wonder. Look into the eyes of another and see the face of God. Look around. Look around. Amen.