

“Why Look at an Empty Sky?”

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[Acts 1:1-11 and Luke 24:44-53](#)

“Hello” is a word we much prefer to the word “Goodbye.” When a loved one is departing on a trip, it isn’t much fun telling them “goodbye.” It is much more enjoyable saying “welcome home” when they return. Most of us have experienced this, I imagine, when a spouse or other family member goes on a short trip, maybe a week or so. The “welcome home” is much better than the “goodbye.” Then there are those with loved ones stationed overseas and those who simply happen to live far away and those who are missionaries in faraway places. When we get to see them after a long absence, saying “hello” is certainly much better than saying “goodbye” when they leave. Yes, I think we all prefer “Hello” to “Goodbye.” There’s a song I like that has a great line in it: “she hates the sounds that goodbyes make.” That probably resonates with all of us.

I imagine it was the same with the disciples. They had spent a few years with Jesus, traveling with Him, sharing in His ministry. And then, it all came to an abrupt end with His cruel death. Yes, He had warned them that this would happen, but they never really got it. They never understood how He could actually die. It just didn’t seem possible, and yet it happened. They had to say “goodbye” to Jesus. Now, I know that our saying “goodbye” to a loved one for a week away from home, or even an extended time, doesn’t really compare to that. Perhaps we can get some idea from having to say goodbye to a loved one who has died. That is the worst goodbye that we can imagine. And yet, I think that saying goodbye to Jesus when he died on the cross was perhaps even more difficult. We all *expect* our loved ones to die at some point – we know it is part of the natural cycle of life. It almost always comes too soon for us, but we know it is going to happen and

we know that our lives are going to go on, though it will be difficult. But the disciples had been following the Son of God! They had been with the Eternal Word of God incarnate! It just made no sense that Jesus could be crucified. They did not expect it and they really did not know how they could go on after Jesus was killed. Their futures were depending on Jesus being there to lead them in ministry. They had left behind everything they knew in life to follow Jesus and now they had to say “goodbye.” It had to be more devastating than we can imagine. But we know the story – we know that Jesus rose from the grave three days later! We know that he appeared to the disciples and they got to say an unexpected “hello, again!” They got to be with Jesus once more and they thought, *this time*, everything is going to work out just the way we want it to! *This time*, Jesus is going to lead us all into a revolution to overthrow the Roman government. *This time*, we’re going to be on the side of the one who is victorious on this earth! We know this is what they were thinking because Luke records it for us in the book of Acts. Jesus had gathered them all together for one last time to give them final instructions before He ascended to Heaven, but they didn’t understand that, either. When they were gathered together, Jesus began to tell them how His life had been to fulfill the scriptures. And they interrupted Him to ask “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” In other words, “Jesus, are we *finally* going to go kick the Romans out and put us in power instead?”

Jesus just told them “that’s really not something you should worry about. Leave that up to God. You just do what I tell you.” And, as He gave them their final instructions, suddenly He was not with them anymore. In Acts, Luke records it this way: “as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” In Luke’s gospel, he says Jesus “withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.” One moment, Jesus is standing there, and the next, He is gone, carried up into heaven. I don’t think they even had a chance to say “goodbye” this time. It’s probably just as well. This would have been the most painful goodbye of all. They had said goodbye before, and then Jesus came back, but now He was gone again. Jesus, as we now recite in

the Apostles' Creed, "ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

So, *now* what are the disciples to do? He has left them again and they are standing there with their jaws open, staring at the sky, wondering what to do next. It is then that Luke records in Acts a really great line. Two angels suddenly appear next to the disciples, and they say, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" What a ridiculous question, they might have thought. *We're looking up toward heaven because Jesus just ascended!* But, the question of the angels was a deeper one. I like the way *The Message* paraphrase puts it: "why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky?" Why bother looking up to heaven because though Jesus is there now, you're *here*? Stop staring at the sky and get to work! Do what He told you to do! Jesus had just told them that their work was here on earth and the angels come along to tell them to *get to work*. Now, here's where I'd expect them to go back behind a locked door or something, but that's not what happens. Luke tells us "they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."

The disciples gave us a great model at this point. They may have gotten things wrong before – not realizing that Jesus really was going to die and be resurrected, hiding in fear after His death, misunderstanding what kind of Messiah He came to be – but now, they get things right! They worship with great joy and bless God. And, we know that they did go out and spread the word, or we probably would not be here today! If they had gone back into hiding and not shared what Jesus taught them, perhaps there would be no Christianity! It was up to them to spread the word, and they did it.

I wonder, though, if that angel might come and ask us the same thing: "why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Now, don't get me wrong, heaven is our final reward. It is something for us to contemplate and to look forward to, but it is not to be our total focus now. All too often, Christians are too busy staring up at heaven to follow Christ's instructions to us here on earth. We

can sing “When We All Get to Heaven” from time to time, but it should not be the primary focus of our lives. We are to be out spreading the word *now*, here on earth. We are to be out working for justice *now*, here on earth. We are to be speaking up for those who have no voice *now*, here on earth. We are to be doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God *now*, here on earth. God has made us to be part of an earthly community before we are part of a heavenly one. God has made us to work together, side by side, with one another, for God’s kingdom to come, and God’s will to be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

Peter Gomes, noted preacher and theologian, said that Jesus’ ascension into heaven has both an upward vision and a downward vision. The upward vision is heaven: “I go to prepare a place for you.” In a fallen world, we need to have something to look toward. We need an upward vision. But Gomes says there is also the downward vision, expressed in the question, “Why are you looking up toward heaven?” In other words, there is more to do. Put your hand to the plow, be faithful and the Lord will return. Immerse yourself in the daily life of this world.

Or, as the expression goes: “bloom where you’re planted.” God has put us on this earth for a time, and He expects us to be fruitful with our time. God expects us to be about the work of the kingdom, right here and right now. This is the downward vision. We are to look upward toward heaven, toward our final resting place, and we are to look downward toward the earth, toward our work to be done now. We are called to be instruments of God’s realm, connecting heaven with earth. We are called to link the joy and grace and peace of heaven with people’s lives right here on this earth. It is what Jesus sent us to do. So, why look at an empty sky? Look down and around you, and spread God’s word right here, right now.

I love the poem by St. Teresa of Avila which reads:

Lord Christ,

You have no body on earth but ours,

No hands but ours,

No feet but ours.

Ours are the eyes through which your compassion must look out on the world.

Ours are the feet by which you may still go about doing good.

Ours are the hands with which you bless people now.

Bless our minds and our bodies,

That we may be a blessing to others.

So, let's stop looking up at an empty sky. We've got work to do, down here. Amen