

Looking into Heaven

Acts 1:1-17 ~ March 19, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

Since 9/11 the business of taking someone to the airport has really changed. Now we tend to take people and drop them off at the curb. Maybe we help them drag their luggage to the counter, give them a quick hug and then get back to the car before airport security notices that we have left it unattended. Taking someone to the airport has become a simple delivery, a quick handshake, and a wave goodbye.

It was not always that way. Before 9/11 taking someone to the airport was a fairly long and involved process. The car was parked in short term parking. Luggage was unloaded and dragged to the ticket counter. So far not much difference between today and the old way it worked. The main difference was that there were no security lines. There was no stopping place between airport parking and the actual gate where you boarded the plane. So when you brought someone to the airport you expected to go with them to the boarding gate. You sat and visited with them while they waited for their plane. Then you watched from windows near the gate as the plane was pushed back, taxied out to the run way, and then took off. Sometimes you even stood for several minutes while the air borne plane became smaller, smaller, and smaller, finally disappearing over the horizon. I think of the old way we used to deliver people to the airport whenever I hear the story about Jesus' ascension. As St. Luke writes in the first chapter of Acts.

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?"

Whenever I took someone particularly dear to the airport I could spend several minutes just staring off into the sky where their plane disappeared. It was a way to stay connected to them after they had left. I always imagine that is what it must have been like for the disciples when Jesus ascended into heaven. There they were just staring off into the sky at where they had last seen Jesus raised up above them. Looking and looking into heaven trying to catch one last glimpse of Jesus, their dear lord and master.

I wonder if any of them were badly startled when the Angels spoke to them while they stared off into heaven. Because when the Bible says "men in white robes" it means

angels or heavenly beings. There is no question about that. These were creatures that knew all about heaven. They knew from personal experience where Jesus had gone. To them there was nothing peculiar or unusual about Jesus floating off into the sky. They knew and understood what was happening as well as we know about eating breakfast or brushing our teeth. It was a routine occurrence for them.

But this was not the case for the disciples. For them this was the last amazing miracle in a long string of amazing miracles. They had seen Jesus walk on water, now they saw him float away into the air. It seems only natural that they would stand there staring and staring and staring. But how long could that go on. The angel politely cleared his throat to get their attention and then said,

Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

What an amazingly gentle rebuke. The heavenly visitors were kind to the disciples, understanding the loss and longing they were experiencing, because of Jesus departure. But there was not time for brown study. There was too much to do to spend the afternoon staring off into heaven. Jesus had been very clear about this. His instructions were still ringing in their ears...

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

What lay ahead for the disciples was really big. It was the entire mission of the Christian church. It was the spread of the Gospel from person to person, church to church, all around the world. As the disciples stood looking up into heaven precious, time was passing and a world was waiting for the Gospel. And so the heavenly beings gently reminded the disciples of what they were supposed to be about. They needed to park their amazement, their fascination, their longing in the hope of Jesus' return. Now there was work to be done. They could not afford to stand looking into heaven. And as we know they didn't waste time. They returned to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit came. The Christian church came into being on the faith and witness of the men and women who knew Jesus and witnessed to him in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

But it is fair to wonder what those angels might say to us. Could it be the same for us as it was for the disciples after the ascension? Could we be staring into heaven instead of what Jesus has called us to do? It's possible, but it depends on what we mean by looking into heaven. Here are some things for us to think about.

What are we looking for in our Christian lives? Are we looking for spiritual fulfillment, miraculous signs, or religious stimulation? These things may just be looking into heaven. If we are looking for God to do something for us, then we may have missed the point. God has already granted us the fullness of salvation by grace in Jesus, what more is there? The ball is now in our court to see what we will do with the amazing gift of grace. The freedom the gospel produces has a purpose. Our lives, our actions, our good works, while completely surplus for our salvation, are designed to be given away for the sake of our neighbors. It is so tempting to sit back and bask in the glory of Christ's grace; to stare off into heaven after the ascending Lord of the universe. But that kind of thing always brings the angels. It produces messengers from God that call us to account for chasing after our own spiritual fulfillment instead of obedience to Jesus commands. First and foremost comes his command that we love each other as he has loved us. But then comes the commission to witness. We are called to witness locally where we are. For the disciples this was Jerusalem. But we don't get to camp there. We are called to push out into the region that surrounds us. For the disciples that was Judea and Samaria. And relentlessly, the Holy Spirit calls us to witness to the ends of the earth. This threefold mission to witness to the Gospel locally, regionally, and internationally is the very core of Christian life.

Jesus Christ is calling each one of us to be his witnesses. We all get that. But can we be practical for a minute? How, exactly do we become witnesses for Jesus? We have jobs to do, lives to lead, families to look after. So how do we go about the business of becoming witnesses for Christ?

Could it be that we are making too much of this? Do we really need to leave our lives behind in order to become witnesses for Jesus? If we look carefully at what Jesus actually says this gets a little easier to figure out. Jesus says that "You will be my witnesses." That doesn't sound like much is being left to chance, does it? It sounds like Jesus has already made up his mind about this. You "will be" sounds like the decision has already been made.

So if Jesus has decided that we are his witnesses, what does that mean for us? It meant a kind of rough life for all of the disciples who first heard this. They all ended up being chased out of Jerusalem because of a persecution led by Saul of Tarsus. Yes, the same fellow who later became St. Paul started out his Biblical career by cruelly persecuting the church in Jerusalem. At first this seems terrible. But the Christian Church was all clumped up in Jerusalem. The persecution Paul led scattered Christian witnesses all across Judea and Samaria just as Jesus had said. And now we find ourselves today at the ends of the earth from that event so long ago.

Yes we do have busy lives. But there is nothing preventing us from becoming witnesses right where we are. If we have jobs to do, well then, let those jobs become the place we witness to Jesus. Most employers prohibit open religious proselytizing, so that is not what we are talking about. But no employer will object to kind, service oriented, and hardworking employees. If a person is that way out of gratitude to Jesus and in the service of the kingdom, then that is a clear witness for Christ. Don't worry whether others know why, the Spirit will make it known to them in due time.

This same principle applies to every aspect of our busy lives. Our call from Christ is a call to service. The busier we are the more opportunity we have to be in service to our neighbor. This is a clear witness to Jesus. But we must depend on the Holy Spirit to communicate it to those around us.

The same is true about looking after our families. The family is a Christian's most important mission field. With our children and spouses, brothers and sisters, and everyone God puts in our families, we have the opportunity to serve Christ by serving them. And in so doing we are witnesses to Jesus. By holding Jesus up as our Lord we both honor him and preach Christ to those around us.

Jesus proclaims that we will be his witnesses reaching out to the ends of the earth. Let's not make it so complicated. For Christians it is simply everyday life. Let's just trust Jesus' Word. We can put our faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's stop looking up into heaven for some kind of religious experience. Let us be who we are. We are witnesses for Jesus in everything we do as we live each day. This goes on day after day inside the reality of Christ's grace and forgiveness. It is the fruit of a life lived in the knowledge of your eternity with God.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.