



***Easter Worship Series: Acts of the ‘Sent Ones’
“Looking Up?”***

7th Sunday of Easter: 1 June 2014—Sermon Text: Acts 1:6-14
FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

“We need to get our heads out of the clouds, our eyes off heaven and instead look at one another and serve one another with the love of Jesus Christ so we are ready for his return”
(Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*).

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Hear the day’s lesson, Acts 1:6-14:

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers (Acts 1:6-14).

Careful readers note that Luke writes two ascension accounts—one concludes Luke’s Gospel the other occurs at the beginning of Acts. If we did not know Luke to be a most gifted biblical writer, we might erroneously imagine that Luke lost track of his story. Yet we know Luke too well. The ascension narrative completes Luke’s Gospel as surely as it inaugurates Acts. While the two ascension stories differ in detail, we may remember that in the Gospel the ascension account recaps the Jesus story, while the ascension story in Acts opens the splendid narrative of the church’s beginning.

As is often the case, the scene of Jesus and the disciples begins as they

ask a question that Jesus answers by saying, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set.” As curt as this response seems Jesus follows up this censure by giving the eleven (Judas has not yet been replaced) a worthy task. The task not only responds to the disciples’ question, but also serves as a plan to Acts. Jesus simply tells them in Acts 1:8 what will happen (the Spirit comes), what they are to do (become witnesses), and where they will work (in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth).

After Jesus completes this last teaching, Luke tells us that Jesus “was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Almost comically, as they stare into heaven two men (angels?) ask: “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” and they explain that Jesus will return as he left.

The disciples then return to Jerusalem from Olivet. This return may have been an element of the theological point Luke wants to report. In any event Luke provides for readers an apostolic list which contains the same names with only the order marginally differing from the original list (at Luke 6:13-16 sans Judas Iscariot). Replacing Judas moves the narrative along after the naming.

Do you remember that the “two men . . . said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’ ” Why did they said this?

It could be the two are simply suggesting that by staring up into the clouds the disciples are looking for Jesus in the wrong place. What is true of Jesus is not that he is up there so much as he is down here where we usually find Jesus—among the teachers in the temple or more likely among those who need him most—the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, or those

in prison (see Matthew 25:44).

Harry Denman (1893-1976), the great lay evangelist in the Methodist church of an earlier generation, told a story that illustrates what it means to have one's head in the clouds and what it means to have one's feet on the ground. It seems that Denman had attended a Methodist General Conference that debated what our church ought and could do about adult literacy—or lack thereof. The General Conference debated and argued for a long time. The General Conference tried to figure out how much money a national effort to erase illiteracy would cost and who would be responsible for raising the money. On and on and on the parliamentary questions went and deliberations occupied some long time. This is what it means to have your head in the clouds.

Then Denman said he returned home from the General Conference to First Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. As he went in the church's back door he noticed an elderly African-American custodian sitting on the church's back steps teaching a nineteen year old youngster how to read. That picture, friends, is what it looks like to have one's feet planted on the ground. From time to time it is good to look up like the disciples did and be inspired by Jesus. But sometimes it is better to simply look around and see about filling a need in someone's life—like Jesus did so often.

As aspiring disciples, it is easy to get caught with our head in the clouds. But for those who want to serve a master who said “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master” (Matthew 10:24) then we know what to do. Those who aspire to be like the ascended Christ will do what Jesus did and go back to work—that is after staring upward for a while. We can debate the great



issues of our time . . . on and on. Or we can decide to do what that old gospel

song suggests and we can “Help Somebody Today!”

Look all around you, find someone in need,
Help somebody today!
Though it be little—a neighborly deed—
Help somebody today!

Help somebody today,
Somebody along life’s way;
Let sorrow be ended,
The friendless befriended,
O help somebody today! (Words: Carrie E. Breck, 1904; Music: Charles H. Gabriel)

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