

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Paying Attention to the Ascension”**

**Luke 24:44 – 53
Acts 1:1 – 11**

First Communion Sunday

May 8, 2016

“They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’”

You know, this text, from the Book of Acts, has always been one of my favorite passages of Scripture... because, to me, it perfectly catches the sense of amazement that any one of us would have, after witnessing one of God’s astonishing miracles. It was about six weeks after Jesus’ resurrection on Easter; He had been meeting and eating with His friends and followers during that time, teaching them and presenting convincing proof of His resurrection; and at the end of this six week, or forty day, period, and after giving some final instructions to His disciples, Luke tells us that: *“he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.”*

And in reaction to this event, Luke goes on to say, as we’ve already seen, that these disciples were standing around, slack-jawed, scratching their heads, staring into space, no doubt wondering “what the heck just happened?” I mean, here these poor guys are... one minute they’re standing there talking with their friend, Jesus; and the next minute Jesus is being lifted up into the air, appearing to sail off into the wild blue yonder, being levitated, apparently, like something out of a David Blaine street magic show.

And the disciples are just stunned; they’re speechless; they’re statue-like, immobile, and totally unsure what to do next. We can imagine their excited jabbering to one another: *“Peter! Did you just see what I saw? Where did He go... where did He go? Somebody grab His feet! Did Mary Magdalene put something in our wine? James, pinch me; I think I might be dreaming!”* and so on...

And, I love the reality of that scene... the humanity and honesty of it. I can see any one of us reacting in pretty much the very same way, if we had seen and experienced what they had. But just when it looks like the disciples might be distracted into a state of permanently confused inaction... the two angels, “two men dressed in white,” as Luke puts it; appear on the scene to get the disciples pointed back in the right direction: *“‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’”*

Now, a lot of Christian people over the years, have taken this passage and focused on the “Jesus coming back” aspect of it... and turned it into a “keep your eyes open for the second coming of Christ” message. And, there is some legitimacy to that view. But, for me, that’s a secondary theme in this text. What is of much more importance, to our ongoing life of discipleship, is the

message that, now that Jesus has been resurrected and ascended into heaven... we have a job to do! And the job we have to do is to carry on in Jesus' footsteps, being about the same ministry in which He was involved, during His days on this earth.

In fact, this may well be the main reason why Luke has emphasized the Ascension event so strongly: to make the point that Jesus is, for the time being, resident in God's presence in heaven... which means that all of *us* who claim Jesus as our Savior and Lord need to pick up the discipleship ball and run with it. Or, to put it another way, our calling as Christians is *not* to stand around, twiddling our thumbs, looking off into space and wondering when Jesus will return; no, our calling as Christians is to focus our attention on the life in front of us... and to do the things that Jesus Himself would be doing, if He was still on this earth working with us.

Which isn't to say, of course, that God and Jesus aren't with us *now* as we live out our life of discipleship! Yes, our Lord is with us, every step of the way. But our ministry, post-Ascension, has taken on a new immediacy and intensity... and we are no longer just *followers* of Jesus, we are now *leaders* and trailblazers in His name.

And this point is emphasized by Jesus Himself, in His instructions to the disciples just before He was taken up into heaven. The disciples had asked Jesus if He was "at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" And by this question, the disciples meant, "now that you've been raised from the dead, Jesus, is God finally going to set up His kingdom here on earth, with Israel as its centerpiece?" And in answer to their question, Jesus tells the disciples:

"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

In other words, stop worrying about what God is going to do... and pay attention to the task at hand, which is what *you* are going to do! You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and when you do, I want for you to *be my witnesses* (to do my work) here in the Holy Land, in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria... and also beyond the Holy Land, all the way to the ends of the earth! No standing around; no staring off into space; no wringing hands, and shaking heads, and wondering what's up with Jesus; just being about the Lord's work... and doing the Lord's will. That's what those first disciples were called to do... and the importance of that call was emphasized by Jesus' Ascension into heaven.

And that's what you and I are called to do, too... all these years later. And since Jesus is still ascended, we need to do that work with the same sense of importance, and immediacy, and urgency; just like the disciples before us. As with the disciples *then*, you and I *now* need to be Jesus' witnesses... not in Jerusalem and Judea, but right here, in Southampton, New York.

We need to proclaim the truth of the gospel... to those who are lost and hurting. We need to demonstrate a kind of life that's founded on the hope and grace of God's love... to those who are looking for purpose and meaning. We need to remind our community that there's more to life than the empty pursuit of status and self-importance... and we find it when we open our hearts to the good that the Lord wants to do us.

We have no more knowledge than the original disciples did, of when Almighty God is going to bring His kingdom to full fruition on this earth. But one thing we know for *sure* is that, in the meantime, we're to be ambassadors for that kingdom in all that we say and do. And that's a job that never ends; whether Jesus returns tomorrow... or ten thousand years from tomorrow!

This morning, we celebrate one of the happy consequences of our work on behalf of God's kingdom... as we welcome these four wonderful young people to the Lord's Table for the very first time! And in a couple of weeks, we'll see still more of the good that happens when we're about God's work... when our Confirmands profess their faith in Christ on Confirmation Sunday.

That's just part of the way in which we fulfill the Lord's calling to be His witnesses... and His workers. In what other ways is God calling us, as a church, and as individual disciples, to make good on this all-important quest? No matter how we answer that question, in the days and weeks ahead; let's just make sure that, no matter what, we don't get caught looking off into space... scratching our heads like we don't know what to do!

We *do* know what to do, as Christian disciples! The challenge before each one of us is to get out there... and do it! That's our life, and that's our calling as disciple of Jesus Christ!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!