

## *Getting it Back to Eye Level*

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher

May 24, 2020, Acts 1:6-11

Before we read the scripture, try to imagine what it looked like for a group of ordinary people standing simply looking up in the sky with their mouths hanging open. If you were walking by, what would you think? Would you shrug your shoulders and move on? Maybe they put some distance between them and those disciples. Or maybe you, too, would have stopped to see what they were looking at in the sky. There they were just standing there until it took some divine intervention to get them back to eye level. Let us read from Acts 1:6-11:

So, when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 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.”

This is the Word of the Lord; Thanks be to God

It is an intriguing site standing there looking upward. Aimee Semple McFearson, an evangelist, faith healer and some say charlatan in the early 1900's was a small diminutive woman. When she started her ministry, she would come into a town and distribute her fliers for a revival at the end of the week. Then she would walk down the main street with a chair in her hands and place it right in the center of the town. She stood on the chair without saying a word. She stood on the chair looking heavenward with her arms outstretched. She gathered quite a crowd. Most were curious at what she was doing. For the entire afternoon, she stood on the chair looking up. Then without any explanation, she got off the chair, picked it up and walked off. She repeated this for the five days prior to her advertised revival. Each day the crowd would grow so at the night of her revival, when she was finally ready to speak, the place was packed. She came on stage and for the first time she lowered her eyes to their level and began to preach. It

was from those beginnings that she grew to the heights of popularity and was able to fill auditoriums of both men and women coming to hear what she had to say. In this rather unorthodox way, she knew how to gather a crowd.

A lot had happened since the resurrection and the disciples had witnessed some incredible things regarding Jesus' appearance. He came to them while they were in shock and grieving in the garden by his own tomb. He appeared in a locked room while they were frightened and in hiding. He appeared on the road when they were confused and were trying to make sense of what happened. He came to them at the seashore when they wanted to forget and pick up where they were before Jesus came into their lives. He gathered them to say good-bye. He was leaving.

As they watched him go, the disciples were suspended looking upward to where he had been. It takes divine intervention to stop Jesus' faithful from looking upward and to get their eyes back toward the ground. It took not one but two celestial-looking men to tap them on the shoulder and say, "What are you doing? The world is not standing still waiting. Don't worry he will come again but it is not up to you to figure that one out! It's time for you to come back and look around at where you are."

As followers of the Ascended Christ, we have to fight the urge to stay there standing looking heavenward waiting for all our questions to be answered. We need to fight the temptation of only looking upward trying to get the answers that will secure our own place with God. You see if we only think about how we can find Jesus up there in the heavens, then we are thinking about only ourselves when there is still work to do down here. It becomes all about me and Jesus and the world's cries are neglected. Many followers throughout time followed this path of securing their own salvation. People's personal relationship with Jesus is all that counts. Suffering, injustice, and neglect does not matter as long as I am right with God.

As Jesus ascends to God, we remain here in the thick of life and in this world. I think those two strangers got Jesus' followers to see that.

Author and theologian and Franciscan Friar and Priest, Richard Rohr writes: "Jesus was a consummate Jew and he was quite aware from his own scriptures (the Old Testament) that God was saving history itself, and all of us in the sweep -- and all of us in spite our ourselves. God always loved Israel in spite of its constant infidelities. Salvation for the Jews was a social and historical notion, not

this much later regression into ‘how can I personally go to heaven?’ This gross individualism pretty much destroyed the historical influence and sweep of the Judeo-Christian religions. Individuals sought to be privately correct instead of learning how to stay connected with everything else.”<sup>1</sup>

Let’s look at our own horizon. I find it rather telling that it takes a pandemic -- something so out of the ordinary to our human imagination -- to discover our need for each other and how much our care for others is needed as well as our attention to our surroundings.

Our need for community is crossing all sorts of barriers and fronts that we have constructed. We are finding ways to connect and reach out to others since we can no longer take it for granted that we are in community.

Keeping it at eye level means not only thinking about ourselves and who we know, it is caring for others. We are called to stay apart out of a need to care and consider another.

This pandemic shows how interrelated we are. It took weeks for this virus to spread globally. Building walls, stopping trade and travel still allowed it to reach even the most isolated places. We need to care what happens in China just as we need to care what happens across the street. Any kind of self-satisfied thinking that it can’t happen to me has been blown away as we see the virus infecting people in nightclubs and churches alike.

What we do affects others. We wear our masks not to protect us from them but that we do not inadvertently infect others. We wear our masks so that our breath does not turn deadly to that person in a grocery aisle who may then in turn infect someone else who is a worker who then infects someone who is vulnerable.

We look around at eye level and know that Christ has left us to care for not only each other but for the place that we call home, our planet. God’s grace and mercy spreads to all creation. As we abuse and misuse our planet for our own comfort and care, we leave others to pay the consequences. Caring for our planet is a justice issue. The poor, the ones who have abused it the least, are paying the price. As climate change becomes more a reality, we realize how we have forgotten our web of connections. We know the victims of the cyclone in India and Bangladesh are a result. We may be followers of the Ascended Christ but we are firmly set in this world. As the storms gain super force because of our

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<sup>1</sup> Rohr, Richard *Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount* p.11

climate changes, we can no longer think only about ourselves and our needs our own salvation. It is not just about god and me it is about God and us living together in God's creation.

The Festival of Homiletics, which was held this week, is kind of a who's who for us preacher types. The theme this year is *preaching a new earth climate and creation*. Scientists, environmentalists, politicians and preachers will all be preaching God's word as we gather together witnessing what it means to be followers of the Risen Lord, not looking up in the sky for answers but looking at each other. Keeping our feet connected to this earth as a part of God's creation. It is our calling to connect with each other, to connect with our earth and to fulfill Christ's mission on this earth by loving God and loving each other.

If this sounds overwhelming, it is. It makes us want to stand out in the middle of a field and look up thinking waiting and thinking that Jesus left this earth a little too soon.

It makes us want to turn into ourselves and think that we are right with God and that is enough -- but that is not enough. It is tempting to do so because of how overwhelming our task in on earth. Jesus did not leave us alone when he rose up into the highest heavens. The very last thing he said is that we are not alone tasked with the monumental work of caring for others and for God's creation. God does not leave us to fend for ourselves. Jesus tells the disciples and us," You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, to Samaria and to the earth."

What does that mean as we look around rather than upward? Stay tuned. Keep looking around you. The Holy Spirit is here! More about that next week... Pentecost is coming! Amen.