

*May 28, 2017*

*Luke 24:50-53:*    ***“The Hope of My Ascension!”***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
2155 North Oakland Avenue  
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“Why Are You Looking Up?” was the title of a sermon written by Andrew Weyerman a number of years ago. I have never read the sermon, even though I did try to find it, but I did come across an illustration that he used in the sermon that caught my attention. In the sermon he writes:

There was a trick we New Yorkers used to play on tourists who visited Manhattan with its huge skyscrapers. We would suddenly stop in a crowded street, tilt our heads backwards as far as possible and stare intently at the top of a high rise such as the Empire State or Pan Am building. Before long a small crowd would gather around and one by one the curious strangers would join in the sky-gazing, wondering what was to be seen, but not wanting to admit that they saw nothing. You could even carry it farther by quietly chuckling while you looked upward. Sure enough, one or two would join in laughing. The spell was broken only when some stouthearted soul would naively (or honestly) ask, “What are you looking at up there?”

It's a funny little trick isn't it? Still, it does betray something about us. We tend to follow what other people are doing or saying without much thought or questioning. We can find ourselves looking at nothing as if we are seeing everything, even pretending that we see it all with perfect clarity when we don't.

That is how a lot of Christians tend to look for, or even look at Jesus - with not much thought or questioning - looking in the wrong places - pretending to see it all while seeing nothing. If you read the gospels, you discover that there is quite a transition that took place when Jesus of Nazareth left this world behind. The disciples are basically asking at his ascension: “Where is he? Where did he go? How do we find him now that he has bodily ascended into heaven?” They should have known the answers because Jesus had told them. And like the disciples, there can be for many of us a moment, or even a whole life time of looking for Jesus where he is nowhere to be found. One almost begins to wonder if the disciples would still be staring up into the sky if it had not be for the two men who stood beside them in white robes! “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.”

It was as if they were saying, “You are looking for Jesus in a way that he will no longer be found until the very last day. You will see him again. But, for now he is gone and will be with you always in a different way until he returns.” They had forgotten what Jesus had said, “And they will say to you, ‘Look, there!’ or ‘Look, here!’ Do not go out or follow them. For as the lightening flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day (Luke 17:23-24).” The disciples should have known better because Jesus had made it perfectly clear, even before he suffered and died.

In John chapter 16, Jesus said to his disciples: “I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.” And because he had told them these things, sorrow filled their heart. Then, Jesus added these words, “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you . . . I still have many things to say

to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” Did you catch that? Jesus will be gone, but HE will have many things to say that they cannot bear right now. The Holy Spirit will say it for him and guide them into all the truth. This is how Jesus will be with them - in his word - the Scripture. And this is how Jesus will be with us always.

The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and gave the New Testament Bible. As it says in 2 Peter 1:21, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” And this is how Jesus says what he wants to say to us. It is time that we stop looking for Jesus in all the wrong places. Do you really want him to speak to you and hold you close? Do you really want him to be with you in your everyday life? If so, then look to the Scriptures, and there you will find him. Why should anyone of us stand while looking up into the sky - in all those places where he is not to be found? We will see him on the last day and forever. But for now, we shall only see him through the eyes of faith, hearing his voice in the Bible, daily dying and rising with him in our Baptisms, and truly being loved by him in his body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine.

Anything other than finding Jesus in the Word and Sacraments is like being deceived by a bunch of people who look up into the sky and pretend to see Jesus when they are not seeing him at all, or seeing something else. God forbid that we stand there looking at nothing or something else and think or pretend that we are seeing it all. Rather, we trust what Christ told the disciples before he left. Do not forget that he did say that it was to our advantage for him to leave, so that the Spirit of truth might come and give us, as Peter says, “all things that pertain to life and godliness through our knowledge of him (1:3).” The way in which we treat Scripture is a true and genuine reflection of the way we would treat Christ if he were here.

We know what the disciples did after Jesus ascended into heaven and were finished sky-gazing at the urging of the two men in white robes, and we should do a similar thing. Our gospel lesson states: “And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God (Luke 14:50-53).” After the two men in white robes shook them up with the question: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?” it seems as if a light bulb finally went off in their heads. With great joy they go to the temple, and they are waiting for the Holy Spirit who will give birth and complete the New Testament Word of God! Their hearts are not full of sorrow because Jesus is gone, because they know he isn’t gone at all, but is with them always! It only makes sense to go there, for in the temple there is everything there about the person and work of Jesus, their Lord and Savior!

Indeed! In the temple is the Scripture. In the temple is the altar of sacrifice that pointed to the cross. In the temple is the washing away of the dirt of sin - holiness. It isn’t long before the disciples find themselves at Pentecost. Ten days later, everything is moving to fulfill the words that Jesus spoke to them. John will eventually write his first epistle and summarize it all with these words: “For there are three that testify: the Spirit [Scripture] and the water [Baptism] and the blood [the Lord’s Supper]; and these three agree . . . Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself . . . And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” Yes! We have the testimony! We have Jesus! We have eternal life! We have all of this even now by faith, but we also look forward to day when Scripture, Baptism, and

the Lord's Supper will give way to that moment when we will bodily rise from the dead and see our Lord face to face, ascend with him in glory, and forever be with him in perfection, be like him, as he is, in a new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness!

As we wait for this moment in this troublesome world, Jesus says in John 14:1-3, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." That is powerful stuff isn't it? It certainly ties in with what we sang in the sermon hymn:

On Christ's ascension I now build  
The hope of my ascension;  
This hope alone has always stilled  
All doubt and apprehension;  
For where the Head is, there as well  
I know His members are to dwell  
When Christ will come and call them.

Apart from his preparation, we are steeped in sin and unable to enter the kingdom of heaven. We are nothing but a people curved in on the ourselves - doing what we want - living a loveless, lawless life. Without the work of Christ, heaven is not a place prepared. But, by his perfect life, by his payment for our sins on the cross, by his ascension to lead the way to the kingdom of the Father, and by his continuing work through the Holy Spirit in the conversion and preservation of us all, Heaven is a place ready to receive us! Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Indeed! Jesus is the hope of our ascension!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott