

Jesus is Coming Back, So Look Busy!

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Scriptures: Acts 1:1-11

Theophilus, in my first book I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, (which by the way, we call the Gospel of Luke)... Following his suffering and death Jesus presented himself alive by many convincing proofs, appearing to many for forty days and speaking further about the kingdom of God. While he was still with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This is what you have heard from my very own lips" he said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days."

But instead they asked him, "Lord, is now the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that God will, will be done. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses here in Jerusalem, then in all Judea and Samaria, and finally to the very ends of the earth."

Then suddenly, in the clear light of day, he was lifted up and the clouds took him out of their sight. As they were gazing up into the heavens, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them and asked, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking up into the sky? This Jesus, who has disappeared into heaven, will come back someday in the same way as you have just seen him leave."

Sermon

Thursday May 9, was the 40th day after Easter. This means that last Thursday, according to Christian calendar, and Luke the writer of Acts, was the anniversary of Jesus' ascension. Now the story of Jesus' ascension is a fascinating story. One reason it is especially captivating is because Jesus gets to do what all of us are secretly hoping for — get out of this world alive! And, according to the Bible, only three persons were able to do that: Elisha and Enoch in the Old Testament, and now, Jesus.

But perhaps you aren't thinking a lot about death right now? We have that convenience currently in our society. But we also know that this is not the reality for many in our world where death is far more common and a daily reality. My intention this morning is not to get you to think about death but to actually consider how to become more fully alive.

After all, one of the most powerful claims of our Christian faith is the hope-filled promise, that we who follow Jesus, know what true life truly is, and are now empowered to overcome our deepest fears! Because on that first Easter morning Jesus actually transcended death.

But perhaps more importantly, for us at least, right here, right now, we can also transcend the "fear of death."

I just love the question that those two "mystery men" dressed in white robes asked Jesus' disciples, "Men of Galilee why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Hmm... haven't we read recently of a

similar encounter where two “men” in dazzling white garments discussed the possibility of resurrection with some of Jesus’ female disciples?

Yes we certainly did, back on Easter morning when we read from Luke 24, about two dazzling dudes who asked those women, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen, just like he said he would.” (The Gospel of Luke, by the way, was likely written by the same author as the book of Acts). Lots of really good questions, but we also know that true faith does not necessarily lead to fewer questions. And the best responses that our faith can produce to all these questions are actions and not merely words.

But back to the topic of death. (Oh great!) Do we overcome our natural fear of death only because we can cast our minds upon the promise of Heaven? Or do we actually transcend our anxieties and possibly overcome our fears of death by finding hope in the here and now?

Death to those of us who have yet to experience it does seem so final. After all, none of us really knows what comes next. Yet seldom when someone dies do we say, “Oh, she died such a good death!” Instead, we often comment on the quality of life that she lived! (Now the topic of “good deaths,” is a good topic but for another day.)

Being good, doing good, and following Jesus should be enough to make us content and stop worrying about how and when we die and what exactly comes after that. None of us have much control over the how and when of our death. And we certainly have no control over what happens after (that, we rightly say, “is in God’s hands.”)

I’m told that heaven “is a wonderful place,” and even though I don’t know many of the specifics, I do want to end up there someday. But for now that’s not up to me. What is up to me is how I treat those I have been asked to share this world with, right now! But I don’t simply care about them because it’s my ticket into heaven; I concern myself with being kind and generous because it may help bring a little bit of heaven down here on earth.

Now some Christians, in my opinion, spend far too much of their time thinking and talking about heaven and how to get there. Since their focus is on the “hereafter,” it kind of screws up their perspective on the purpose of one’s life down here on earth. If the purpose of life is simply about getting to heaven, then what is the rest of it all for? Why doesn’t God just take us home the moment we ask Jesus into our hearts to become our personal savior?

As I read the New Testament, the point doesn’t seem to be to simply salvage a certain select group of folks from a destroyed planet. Instead, the point is the promised re-creation by God of both a New Heavens and a New Earth. Some kind of new cosmic intertwining that is revealed to us in ways we were unable to fully comprehend before. Our bi-polar understandings and experiences will finally give way to a uni-polar existence of the Divine Creator’s love. An existence spoken of in the beginning, in Genesis, where we too will one day, like Adam did, “walk in the cool of the day” with our Creator. A time when all of creation, will be like it was before, and can cease its “groaning,” that came about as a result of the bad choices of us humans.

So allow me now to direct the questions to you and to me, “People of FCMF what are you staring at? Where is your focus?” Think about it for a moment. What were those folks, who were watching Jesus disappear into the clouds, being asked to do? Think about all that they had been through with Jesus, what he had taught them, and what he had shown them.

He had turned upside down so many of their commonly held understandings and assumptions. He had asked them to change many of their perceptions and he had challenged some of their most cherished beliefs! And they were challenged and changed to their very core.

“Wait a minute, whaddaya mean you’re leaving?” “Your work down here is far from done — you can’t leave now!” “Aren’t you gonna set up your earthly kingdom and violently expel our oppressors?”

All that time spent with Jesus and they somehow still didn’t get it! Had they been focused on the wrong thing? Was true redemption really to come through domination? But Jesus’ focus was not on the use of the power of intimidation or violence, but on the use of the more powerful forces of forgiveness and redemption!

Jesus took his Messianic call from the image, in Isaiah 42, of what is called, “the Suffering Servant Messiah!” A very particular Savior of the world, who comes, not to violently subdue evil doers, but who comes to redeem and heal all of God’s creation as a loving, sacrificial servant.

There are so many paradoxes to embrace here - perhaps too many? Maybe that’s why we need a whole season, at least 40 days, which we call the Easter season to figure it out and to let it all sink in?

First, the very “Son of God,” rather than charging from the heavens with legions of angels to destroy all evil doers and save the righteous, was instead executed on a cross. The conundrum of an empty tomb raised the possibility of resurrection. Then he did appear, walking and talking and eating bread and fish with his followers. Yes, resurrection is possible! Jesus completed the trifacta, what we might call the triple play or in honor of the 150th running of the Kentucky Derby, the triple crown — resurrection and now ascension!

No one had done that before and nor has anyone done it since. But the same power that did do that is also available now to us - available especially to enable us to truly live our lives fully. Throughout human history there are stories of folks who climbed mountaintops to await the arrival or return of God. Even in our own Anabaptist history there are those who thought they needed to use violent force, or to flee to the wilderness, in an attempt to somehow force God’s hand to end this evil world.

And none of those attempts appear to have made a difference. But the folks who have made a difference in our world made a more powerful decision to live their lives to the fullest by serving others. We have been promised a jubilant return of Jesus to inaugurate God’s New Heaven and New Earth! The best advice that I can give any of you, until that day happens is, “Look busy!”