

Why Are You Looking into the Sky?

Acts 1:1-11

Introduction

This is Ascension Sunday, a day of great celebration in the Christian Church. On this day we celebrate an historical event that happened 40 days after Easter when the earthly ministry of Jesus was officially completed, and He returned to heaven in very dramatic fashion, rising up into the air, riding on a cloud until He disappeared from sight. In that really cool moment, the task of sharing the Good News of God's great love to all of humanity was handed off from Jesus to the disciples who had followed Him for the previous three years.

There is a classic story about this event that regularly makes its way through preacher circles. It goes like this:

As Jesus was arriving back at heaven following the Ascension, he was met by a rookie angel who had been given the job of hanging "Welcome Home Jesus" banners on the Pearly Gates. This rookie angel was very excited to be the first one in heaven to see Jesus upon His return. In his excitement he started to fire questions to the Lord. He wanted to know everything. What it was like to be born? Was it fun being a little boy? What it felt like to heal someone? What was His favorite miracle? His favorite parable? How bad was the pain from the cross and the crown of thorns?

After peppering the Lord with dozens of such questions, the angel finally asked: "Jesus, now that you are back here in heaven, who will continue to share the good news of God's love with all the people still on earth?"

Jesus responded, "There are 11 men who were especially close to me, and I have given them the responsibility of spreading that word."

"O Lord," the rookie angel said. "I would love to meet these 11 men. They must be incredibly talented people, the best and the brightest humans ever to be born!"

"Well, actually no," Jesus answered. "They are pretty average men with only ordinary abilities. They are nowhere close to being best and the brightest. Not by any means."

"But Lord, telling people about God's love is the most important job in the world! If these are only average people with ordinary abilities, how do you know they won't fail? What is your 'Plan B'?"

There was only a momentary pause before Jesus quietly answered him. "There is no Plan B."

When the Gospel of Matthew tells this story of this Ascension event, we are given the words we now know as the Great Commission.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:19-20)

When Luke tells it, he frames the Great Commission like this:

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. (Acts 1:8)

What a scene that must have been! Can you picture it? There you are on this Galilean hillside, and right before your very eyes Jesus starts to rise up into the clouds until you can't see Him anymore. And the last words you hear Him say before His feet leave the ground are two "will" statements:

- You will receive power
- You will be my witnesses

Wow! How awesome is that?

The majesty of such a moment lives on for quite some time. But then reality begins to settle in, and you begin to think about what Jesus said ... not just what He did. Witnesses? To the ends of the earth? What does that mean? And if you are one of those disciples who heard those words, you realize you have to figure it out. You have to know what it means, because ... remember ... there is no Plan B.

Those disciples are all gone now. Most of them would be martyred; only one of them would die of old age. With their deaths, the task of being witnesses was passed on from those first 11 disciples to those who became followers of Jesus because of their witness. And so it continued. From one generation to the next. Down through the centuries. Plan A is functioning well. And that's good, because there is no Plan B.

You ... will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Each generation of Christians over the past 2,000 years has had to wrestle with the very same question asked by those original 11 disciples: "Witness? What does mean for me?"

So here we are. You and me. Followers of Jesus living in the year 2020. And the question is before us too.

What does it mean to be a witness in this day?

As we consider it today, I want to refocus our thoughts in two ways. One is a reminder; the other is a new perspective. First, the reminder.

#1: OUR MISSION (THE REMINDER)

Our call is to be a witness. The text reads:

You ... will be my witnesses ... (Acts 1:8)

I have served on one jury in my lifetime. The defendant was charged with breaking and entering and theft. In the opening arguments, the defendant's lawyer told us that this charge was actually the result of a nasty breakup between a boyfriend and girlfriend. The girlfriend was in the courtroom, and she still looked pretty mad to me.

The defense lawyer said that his client had gone back to the house to pick up his stuff at a time the two of them had agreed upon. Since she was not home, he went in, took only what was his, and left his house key on the counter.

The prosecution had an opening argument, but it must not have been very persuasive because I don't remember it. But I do remember at this point in the trial feeling pretty sorry for that defendant and pretty aggravated that they called me to serve on a case when it was clear this girl was out after revenge.

Other than the defendant, there was one witness in the trial, called by the prosecution. This guy's backyard and the girlfriend's backyard faced each other, separated only by an alley. The witness told us how on this particular day he was resting on his back porch, taking a break from mowing his yard on this hot summer afternoon.

- He watched the girlfriend lock the door and leave for work.
- He watched as the defendant arrived only a minute or so later.
- He watched the defendant back his truck across the yard up to the back door.
- And he watched as the defendant kicked the back door open and carried out only a TV set and game console.

The prosecutor asked one more question of the witness: "Would you please tell the court what you do for a living?" He replied, "I'm retired, after serving 32 years as a detective for the Clark County Sheriff's Office."

We found the defendant guilty because a credible witness told us what he had seen.

My vote on that jury was based on the testimony of that witness. Had he not come forward and shared what he saw, I am confident I would have voted "not guilty." But there was a witness! And that changed everything.

You and I have been called by God to be credible witnesses to what we have seen God do ... in our lives, in the lives of others. Nothing more. Nothing less.

We are sometimes convinced that our eyewitness testimonies to the work of God in our lives are not worth sharing. But let me remind you this morning that such feelings do not come from the Holy Spirit who has come to give you the power. His power is so that you will be a witness.

Now the perspective:

#2: OUR MISSION FIELD (THE PERSPECTIVE)

In the last words of Jesus, He provides this beautiful imagery of concentric circles, showing how the Gospel spreads – like ripples in a lake – as we fulfill our duty to be witnesses:

You ... will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Those words have no doubt inspired every missionary who has ever served on any mission field, no matter where in the world they have served. I am grateful for every person who has heard those words through the centuries and left the comfort of home to be a witness in some other place.

- **I encourage us as a congregation to be fervent in our prayers that God raise up pastors and missionaries through our ministry. A healthy congregation like ours needs to multiply its ministry through the people we send out from here to the Judeas, Samarias, and to the ends of the earth. That is part of my daily prayer for our church, and I hope you will join me in it.**

When Jesus spoke those words, His disciples – and disciples through the centuries – that the Good News would less and less familiar to the hearers as the witnesses got farther and farther away from Jerusalem.

- Jerusalem was filled with the Jews. The people of God. The Temple. The Pharisees and Sadducees. People who had been raised in the traditions of the faith and in communities that supported their beliefs. Let's call them the **VERY RELIGIOUS**.
- Judea was also largely populated with Jews, but these folks had fewer religious reminders around them. There was less pressure to live out the faith on a daily basis. Let's call them the **MOSTLY RELIGIOUS**.
- Samaria was even less committed to matters of faith. Because the Samaritan's Jewish ancestors had intermarried with the pagans around them, what little faith they had was a conglomeration of many faiths and practices – many of which we would consider to be idolatry. They had memories of true faith, but only distant ones. Let's call them the **BARELY RELIGIOUS**.
- And finally, the ends of the earth. These people knew nothing of Jesus or His death on a cross. These are the **RARELY RELIGIOUS**.

The task of being a witness for those first disciples involved sharing the Good News with all four groups. And they thought of those groups geographically.

- We are called to be a witness to these same four groups. And we don't have to leave the city limits to find them. No matter what city you are in.
- All around you are those who are VERY religious, MOSTLY religious, BARELY religious and RARELY religious. They are in your neighborhood, your work place and maybe even your family.
- You are to be a credible conveyer of what you have seen God do in your life.

Being a witness to the ends of the earth might take you no further than the end of your street.

- Strolling through Kroger or Meijer may well take you through Judea and Samaria.
- Your next family reunion could well be your own missionary journey.

Not because of the nationalities represented in any of these places. Not because of the color of anyone's skin. But solely because of their distance from God. From the VERY, MOSTLY, BARELY and RARELY, our lives are a daily intersection of religious cultures. And we are called to be a witness to each of them.

APPLICATION

The sight of Jesus heading into the heavens was so amazing, the disciples couldn't stop watching.

- Even though they could no longer see Jesus, they kept staring at the sky.

Until the angel asked a GREAT QUESTION:

Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? (Acts 1:11)

There is a job to do, a mission to fulfill. And it is time to get to work.

Amen.