

Kirk of St James
Sunday May 6, 2018
Sermon "Why Are you Staring"
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Have you ever found yourself in the middle of a situation where you did not know how to react? I am one of those people who think of the perfect come back line about a week after something has happened. Some people have the absolute gift of always knowing how to respond to any situation. In his book "Speak Like Churchill Stand Like Lincoln" James Humes recounts a story about a politician on the campaign trail. During a rally the first candidate stood up, gave a rather long-winded speech and then encouraged everyone to come out and vote for him on June 3rd. The second candidate stood up and said, "I absolutely agree with my opponent, come out and vote for him on June 3rd, and then on the actual election day June 4th vote for me" and sat back down. It would have taken me two weeks to think that one up!

When we come to the first passage in Acts today we find the disciples unsure of how to react. For forty days after the resurrection Jesus spends time with the disciples as he continues to teach them and guide them. The joy and hope of Easter is present among them. Then one day just as unexpectedly Jesus is suddenly whisked away from them. I believe that what happened next was the only natural reaction and that was to stand there staring straight up wondering if Jesus would rocket back to earth. It takes what is presumably two angels asking the men what they are looking at to shake them back to life. Today in church we mark ascension Sunday, the day that Jesus was lifted out of the sight of his disciples and into heaven. A day that compared to many others in our church year seems like a very lackluster moment. There are no flowers, banners, or special liturgies for this day. It lacks the exuberance of Easter, and the power of Pentecost--yet here we are in the middle of it all.

It does not help that artwork throughout the centuries has depicted this scene in unfortunate and comical ways. Ancient art such as mosaics were used to portray important scenes in the bible to a public that was often illiterate. While they were unable to read the gospel for themselves, through art they were able to learn about the Good News. This moment in the Bible was often portrayed by a pair of feet sticking out of a cloud while the disciples are standing and gawking and gaping from below. It does not make for a very majestic moment!

However, the ascension of Jesus is a pivotal moment in the Christian story. It makes it into both the Nicene Creed, Apostles Creed, and other confessions of faith. It is a part of the yearly lectionary cycle reminding us that we need to remember this moment--it is an important part of our Christian story. So, what it is about this encounter in the life of Jesus that is so important, and why is it relevant in today's modern world?

Before we look at the biblical passage itself it may be helpful to first take a quick look at where it is in the Bible. One of my New Testament professors always referred to Luke as "Dr Luke." Many believe him to be a man who was well educated and knowledgeable. This chapter in Acts is a bridge between the writing in the gospel of Luke into the story of Acts. Both books are attributed to Luke and in some ways, Acts is really a "part two" of his gospel. As one biblical scholar pointed out both books are addressed to the same person, Theophilus. "His title "most excellent" indicates that he may have been a patron with a certain social standing in the community, whose endorsement ensured a wide readership." Luke makes it clear that his first book covers everything that he began to do and teach, until the day he was taken up. So, while the book of Luke narrates the "acts of Jesus" the book of Acts should be more properly called the "Acts of the Holy Spirit" because it covers the activity of the Holy

Spirit in the church after the departure of Jesus. This account links the life and ministry of Jesus with the ongoing work of the holy spirit and apostles.

Therefore, this slightly awkward and sudden moment is vitally important when we look at the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit and the role we continue to this day as his disciples. It is a crossover between the Holy and the human. One commentator said "This is the event that changes the locus of Christ's work and ministry from Jesus himself to those who follow him. Jesus is no longer here to preach good news, heal the sick, and feed the hungry. This mission now falls to the disciples" and those who will follow. When we look at this moment through the lens of our call and work as disciples of Christ we now know why it is so important in our modern world. Jesus may have returned to heaven but, the work he started must continue.

This realization is both empowering and terrifying in our modern context. To know that we have been given responsibilities, that we have been commissioned, and that we stand in an extensive line of people who have gone before us and worked to fulfill these duties both in this church and the wider church in the world. Looking at the struggles in our world today this can be an overwhelming prospect. Where do we even start?

There is a prayer that is attributed to Teresa of Avila that gives us a good place to start. In this prayer it says "God of love, help us to remember that Christ has no body now on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world. Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone now. Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good." What better place to work that right where we are? I was really touched by a story I read in the paper a few months ago. It has stuck with me since then and you likely read it too. It happened in Souris, in a kindergarten class room during story time. One little student looked at her classmate, and not meaning to be mean commented "your shirt is on

backwards." While just meant as an observation the little one with the backwards shirt quickly turned red and felt embarrassed. Some of her classmates began to laugh. As the teacher sought to turn this into a teaching moment explaining how something embarrassing like this could hurt someone's feelings she noticed another little classmate quietly take her arms out of her shirt and turn it around. Soon most of the class was quietly sitting there with their shirts on backwards without saying a word about it. When Charlotte Garret who was the first to turn her shirt around was asked why she did it she simply replied, "I didn't want Charley (the original student with the backwards shirt) to feel sad."

That day Charlotte saw a need in the world and she quietly responded to it and there is a lesson there for each of us. Sometimes I wonder if one of the hardest parts in the Christian life is to stop staring heavenward and instead look at the world just where we are and see what we can do to help. Sometimes I wonder if I make it too complicated in my own faith life. That I am standing there looking heavenward asking "God what would you have me do, just give me a sign." When meanwhile God is going "just look around you and use your eyes, hands, feet and heart right where you are." There is an additional detail about ascension art that I did not mention but, is important. Many of the paintings and other mediums used to depict it not only have Jesus disappearing into a cloud, many of them show something else. if you look closely "not up in the clouds, but down on the ground--you will see footprints on the earth. Some artists have painted indentations in the rock. Others have etched black and white foot prints on the ground not far from where the disciples are standing with their mouths open." It is a great reminder for us to stop staring heavenward and allow our own feet to carry us into the world. May each of us have the eyes of Christ to see, the heart of Christ to respond, and the hands and feet to do the work.