

“Don’t Go to Church!”
Texts: Jeremiah 29:4-7, 10-14; Acts 1:6-14
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They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?’ Acts 1:11a

Well, you have all blatantly disregarded this morning’s sermon title and you’ve come to church. Fortunately, I did prepare a sermon! Now, there is the possibility that some of you have come to church today to learn why you should not come to church. More likely, especially for those of you who know me well, you are aware of the irony of the statement from a pastor who would want nothing more than to preach to a packed sanctuary every Sunday morning, and you’ve come anticipating an ironic twist in the sermon that applauds your being in worship and encourages you to come every Sunday that you are able. I know a preacher who says that most people come to church every Sunday. Unless the weather is too bad. Or too good.

More likely than either of those first two options is the possibility that you have come to worship this morning not to hear a sermon but to have an encounter. Despite all persistent arguments to the contrary, I still believe that people come to church expecting to meet God. In fact, I think one of the reasons for the challenges facing so many of our churches in the 21st Century is that pastors and church leaders have stopped expecting God to actually show up in our worship and in our work. Shame on us for this lack of faith in the one whom we proclaim. You are here, I believe, because you expect that God will meet you here, in this sacred space and time. No more sacred than any other space and time except that we pause long enough to recognize, acknowledge, and share with one another the presence of almighty God. You have come expecting something.

Expectation is the first word that comes to mind when I read the passage this morning from Acts. Forty days have passed since that glorious Easter morning and Jesus has been busy teaching and preaching in Jerusalem as his movement has grown. And in the scene described in this morning’s story, the disciples have all gathered together, waiting expectantly for what was to come next. Would the kingdom of God come down? Would the streets be paved with gold? Would there be an end to oppression, injustice, and cruelty? Would the disciples get to wear crowns? Their minds must have been racing as Jesus gathered them together and, filled with hope, they ask a bold question: is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom?

Jesus’ response, as eloquent as it is, must have been disheartening for the disciples. The time, he says, is not for you to know. Instead, Jesus promises them that the Holy Spirit will come and dwell with them in this *in between* time. He explains that they will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

And then he leaves. He just disappears into heaven. As I studied the passage this week, I realized that I have always imagined the ascension of Jesus as one of the most

visually stunning and dramatic moments in all the New Testament. I think it started with a particular picture in my Children's Bible. Jesus, dressed in a radiant robe, ascending into the clouds, halo around his head, heavenly light shining all around, bursting from his fingers and toes. The disciples, showered in holiness, standing below with their arms outstretched and knowing smiles on all their faces.

It may have happened exactly that way. The editors of my Children's Bible may have gotten it just right. But I do feel a responsibility to report to you, after having read the account in Acts in search of such a scene, that none of those details, so colorfully illustrated in my Bible, appear in the text. Luke is not writing a screenplay for an eye-catching ascension scene that will draw crowds. Luke, who wrote Acts, was an historian. And so he simply reports that Jesus "was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." Gone, just like that, and no chance to say goodbye. And the disciples? Dumbfounded, gazing up toward heaven. Knowing smiles? How about tear-filled eyes. They are so taken aback that they have no reply when two white-robed men appear on the scene and ask them the question that is really at the heart of this story, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

Have you been there? In the disciple's shoes, watching Jesus disappear behind the clouds. Have you watched as your hope faded into the distance? Have you whispered to God that simple question, "Where are you?" The disciples gazed up toward heaven. Where are you?

Last summer, driving down a country road in Missouri, I saw a small white church building on the top of a hill with a sign out front that read, "When life is too much to bear, just look up, he's always there." Is it really that simple? Does this sentimental sound byte really do justice to the complexities of our lives? I don't think so. There seems to be a kind of fear at the heart of these platitudes that fails to recognize the depth of pain that we humans do experience. Of all people, Christians ought to be the most honest about the reality of evil and suffering in the world. But for too long our message has been one of blindfolded denial, simply shouting greeting card affirmations above the din of our real world experiences. Hiding behind some vague notion of "God's will" rather than coming to terms with how hard this life can be. "Just look up; he's always there." Well, recite that tender creed to the disciples who are staring into the sky where the source of their hope has just disappeared behind the clouds. Recite it to the grieving mother of a lost child. Recite it to those who suffer from the pain of alienation and depression. Recite it to anyone who has known what it is like to wake in the middle of the night filled with fear at what tomorrow may bring. It's just not that simple.

Ironically, the question asked by the divine messengers in Acts expressly precisely the opposite position as the church billboard. The two men in white robes ask the disciples, Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?

The disciples' answer to the question is not given. Perhaps it was too heartbreaking for Luke to write. He records no words. Rather, he writes that the disciples returned to Jerusalem. And there these disciples did something so courageous and monumental that Luke takes the time to identify them all by name. They devoted themselves to prayer, communal gathering, scripture reading, and ministry to the poor and outcast. In

other words, amid their confusion and fear and grief, they start being church. Jesus has promised that they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit, but that will not take place until Pentecost, which is a week away. In the meantime the disciples must tend to the ordinary tasks ahead of them, even when it seems hopeless, even when clouds block the sun. When life seems too much to bear, the disciples begin looking around and there they find their ministry.

A friend of mine, who is a pastor in North Carolina, sent me an email not long ago recounting an experience that she had while walking on a trail near her home. Coming toward her, walking in the opposite direction, was a young man wearing a white t-shirt with large red letters emblazoned on the front, "Don't Go To Church!" As he passed by, my pastor friend, with both irritation and curiosity, couldn't help but take a peek at the back of his t-shirt. In equally bold, red letters it read, "Be the church!"ⁱ

Don't go to church. Be the church. It is a message that those first disciples took to heart. We would do well to follow their lead. It is not enough to gaze into heaven; we are called to ministry here and now.

I'm thinking this morning of a pastor in our Presbytery who I've been privileged to get to know in recent months. He is an unassuming, quiet, humble man with a wide smile and bright eyes. At Tuesday's meeting of the Presbytery, we celebrated his retirement after thirty-nine years of ordained ministry as a parish pastor and as a military chaplain. His retirement resolution was read by a member of his congregation, who included his gratitude to the pastor for painting the man's dining room several years ago free of charge. (Don't get any ideas—I'm a terrible painter!)

When the pastor stood to address the Presbytery, there were tears in his eyes. He described how much he would miss his congregation and how difficult it was to say goodbye. And then he told us a story that he said summed up his theology of ministry. When he was still a military chaplain, he was on a ship that was anchored off the coast of Greece with several hundred marines. One evening on the ship, as he prepared for bed, he could tell that there was a large gathering taking place with music and fanfare just across from his quarters. Still, being tired and not in the mood for a party, he was taking off his shoes to retire for the evening when a loud knock came at the door. It was the ship's commander, who said, "Come on over, there's someone I want you to meet."

There is only one answer to the commander: "Aye-aye, Sir." And he put on his shoes and headed across the hall. Upon entering a large gathering space, he saw, seated in a chair across the room, a Greek Orthodox priest. He was dressed from head to toe in a black robe, and had the largest thickest black beard you could imagine. The commander introduced these two clergymen and the chaplain sat down. The priest spoke not a word of English. The chaplain spoke not a word of Greek. They communicated through an interpreter and the priest asked what the primary tasks of the military chaplain were. Through the interpreter, the chaplain described the duties assigned to him; providing chapel worship and pastoral services for those on the ship, leading Bible studies, preaching, teaching. He listened as the interpreter shared his answers and the priest nodded politely. Then he paused and, after thinking for a moment, he asked the interpreter to share one more thought. "Really," he said, "what I

do is remind every person on this ship that God loves them. That's my main task." The interpreter shared those words. The Greek Orthodox priest opened his eyes widely and smiled, shouting a word that transcended language barriers and needed no translation: "Hallelujah!"ⁱⁱ

What do you do in the meantime, before the Spirit comes, before you know what you believe about this sometimes-inaudible God? In my experience, you just take the next step. You wake up and you get out of bed and you look out the window. Still cloudy? Maybe the sun will return tomorrow, but you must live today. You do your best to see the holy in the ordinary. You try hard to breathe even in the most painful moments. You treat those around you gently and with respect. You tend to the ordinary tasks ahead of you: prayer, scripture, community, and care of others. You remind all those whom you meet, especially yourself, that God loves us. You find your ministry. And you pay attention for glimpses of sunlight through the clouds.

Why do you stand gazing *up* toward heaven? Do you not understand that the Spirit has come and is moving among us? Why do you stand gazing up when the truth is all around you, in this fearful, needy, broken world. It is our brokenness, after all, that enables us to see the light, not flooding but seeping in through the cracks and holes in our lives.

Jeremiah was writing to a community of faith exiled in Babylon. Their hope had faded and they were looking up, asking God what they had done to deserve such punishment. Their temple, the place where they met and worshipped God, had been completely destroyed. They were despondent. But the prophet realigns their vision. Seek the welfare of the place where you are. Be the community of faith in this place, even in the midst of exile. And, though you may not know exactly when, you can trust that faith and hope will return. And when they do return, well, I can't say it any better than Jeremiah:

"Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, I will let you find me, says the Lord, I will restore you and gather you in, I will bring you back into my presence." Those days are surely coming, brothers and sisters. And until they do, *let us be the church here and now.*

ⁱ Thanks to the Rev. Cheryl Henry for sharing this wonderful encounter.

ⁱⁱ Thanks to the Rev. Tony Dean for his faithful witness to the gospel and for this story.