

Looking In All the Wrong Places

Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

No matter what you've lost, you will find it in the last place you look. Because once you find it, you stop looking. But sometimes, you find it in the first place you look. The item may be lost, but you have a pretty good idea where it might be. Other times, you rack your brain trying to figure out where something is. Out of desperation, you look for your car keys in the freezer, the dryer, and a coat you haven't worn in six months. Sometimes what we really mean is that you will find the lost item in the last place you'd even think to look.

The disciples seem to be having that problem this morning. They're not sure exactly where to look for Jesus. At first, they're too focused on their own selfish desires, so they miss what Jesus is trying to tell them. Then they swing the other way, and they're too focused on the mysteries of heaven, and again they miss the point. And the point here is that the disciples are looking for Jesus in the wrong places, but we can know the right place.

This story takes place after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus has been around for 40 days after he came back to life, and unknown to the disciples, this is his last day, his last moment with them. Jesus says to them, "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from

now.” This is Jesus’ closing statement, his final remarks, his last words on the earth. Probably we should be paying attention, but instead, the disciples interrupt him.

They ask Jesus, “Now are we going to restore honor and glory to Israel?” Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit, and the disciples somehow interpret that as the strength they need to overthrow Rome and return to the glory days when Jews lived in safety in their own country. The disciples just can’t seem to let go of the idea of a conquering Messiah. But Jesus sort of refuses to answer their question, because once again, the disciples seem to be completely off-topic. They have interrupted what Jesus intends to be his very last words and commands for his students.

Jesus responds by saying, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” In other words, Jesus says, “When it happens, if it happens, it will be God’s timing. Which, basically, is irrelevant and none of your business. And completely unrelated to what I’m trying to say.” And then Jesus sort of restates himself, because he doesn’t want the disciples to miss the importance of what he’s saying. So he goes back to talking about the Holy Spirit. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” Jesus tells them this Spirit will enable them to carry on his mission, and then he ascends into heaven.

The text gives us a pretty odd image this morning. One moment, Jesus is standing there talking about the Holy Spirit, and the next his feet lift up off the ground. He just starts to rise into the sky like a helium balloon! Naturally, the disciples watch him go, and when he is blocked from view by a cloud, they continue to stare at the last place he was. I picture the disciples, mouths wide open, sort of frozen in time with a mixture of awe and confusion. Who knows how long they would have stood there, but for a couple angels who appear on the scene to keep things moving.

This is my favorite part of the story. The angels don't announce their presence; they just come up behind the disciples and say, "Why are you looking up? Jesus will come back in the same way you saw him go." First of all, they probably scared the bejeebers out of the disciples. But second, honestly, what a dumb question! They're looking up because Jesus just went up. I'm pretty sure we'd all do the same thing. But what exactly do the angels mean by 'he will come back in the same way you saw him go?'

Because if they mean Jesus will descend out of the clouds like a balloon drifts to the floor when its helium is gone, then shouldn't I, in fact, spend the rest of my life looking up? Hoping to catch a glimpse of him as soon as he reappears? Unless that wasn't what they meant. Maybe they weren't speaking literally. Maybe they didn't mean the method of arrival, but the timing. As a surprise. If Jesus is coming back at an unpredictable time, a time chosen as a surprise, then I need to stop looking up. Kind of like how Santa never shows up until everyone in the house is sound asleep.

At any rate, the angels make it clear that we won't find Jesus by looking up. And Jesus makes it clear that we won't find him by trying to make him fit into our expectations and ideas for God, for the Messiah. So where should we be looking? Where is Jesus?

The hint for us comes from those startling angels. "Jesus is coming back the way you saw him go." How did Jesus go? It seems kind of abrupt, really. Jesus was in the middle of telling the disciples about the Holy Spirit. About being his witnesses all over the world. That's how we will see Jesus. It's how we have seen Jesus. When we are his witnesses.

Jesus gives the disciples very few specifics about witnessing. He tells them to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit, but then they should witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In other words, start right here. Right now. There's no need to wait for the right

moment, or the right people. Wherever you are is the right place. You should be witnessing to Jesus Christ at all times and in all places. Because we witness to Jesus not only with words, but with our very lives. Sure, you can use words; lots of people do. But lots of other people find that intimidating. But what should never be intimidating to us is to live our lives as Jesus did. To imitate his life and follow in his footsteps.

You can choose whether you want to witness to Jesus with your words. But when you accept the label 'Christian,' you witness to Jesus with your whole life, whether you want to or not. People are looking to see what difference it makes for you and for others. As a Christian, with your very life, you are a witness.

But Jesus goes on. We should not only witness where we are with our lives, we should go to Judea and Samaria. Judea, that's where the disciples grew up, where they met and followed Jesus. Judea is home. And Samaria? That's where the religious rivals of the Jews live. So witness to Jesus at home. Don't assume the people there already know about God's love. But also witness to Jesus in enemy territory. Don't be afraid to proclaim Jesus to those you know will disagree. No one's saying you have to convert everyone. Or anyone. Our job is to share what we know, what we believe. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says that his message is so important that if we are silent, the very rocks of the earth will start to shout.

So we are to witness right where we are, back where we come from, and even among those who may disagree with us. But Jesus also adds that we should also witness everywhere else in the world. And that means a few things. First, it means we are going to have to be intentional about sharing our story. We might accidentally witness in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, we might accidentally witness in a few other places, but if we're really going to cover everywhere, we're going to need a certain level of purpose and organization.

And we also need to understand that this is an ongoing mission Jesus has given us. Jerusalem? Check. Judea? Check. Samaria? Check. It's not too hard to picture ourselves doing just the minimum to get by, because we live in a culture that finds it difficult to share our faith story. But it's a lot harder for us to cross 'everywhere' off our list. Imagine a honey-do list: wash car, fold laundry, do everything. Jesus wanted his disciples to know that this was their mission. Their purpose for their lives. To share the message of God's amazing love everywhere and at all times.

Wait a minute. This started out as a sermon on where to find Jesus. How did it end up as a sermon telling you that you should witness to your faith? Because that is where we see Jesus. Obviously we hope that when we follow Christ, whether we use words or not, people will see Jesus in us. But more often than not, we find that we are delightfully surprised to discover that we see Jesus in others as well.

After all, even Jesus didn't spend much time with the good, observant Jews. He touched lepers. He spoke to women, even prostitutes. He was the house guest of tax collectors. And Jesus found faith and possibility in each one of these. Imagine what we might see. Amen and amen.