



Time to Fly

Acts 1:1-11

TRINITY PULPIT

Men of Galilee why are you standing gazing into the heavens? That is not the first question we find two men in white asking the disciples in the post resurrection stories. On that first day of resurrection two men in white asked, “why do you look for the living among the dead?” It seems the disciples in the post resurrection stories are in many cases looking in the wrong direction, asking the wrong questions and focused on the wrong things. You can’t blame them. When they came to the tomb, just a day or so after the crucifixion, they expected to find a corpse. They were looking for dead among the dead, but Jesus was not there.

Now they had just seen something remarkable. Jesus, who had spent the past 40 days with His disciples appearing and teaching them many things, had just commissioned them and then disappeared again out of their sight. He was gone. Who would not gaze into heaven? Who would not just stand there amazed? It reminds us a little of the transfiguration when Peter, James and John see Jesus in all His glory, say it is good to be here. It is good to be right here. Let’s build a shelter for you, Elijah and Moses. Let’s stay right here. Yet, just as in this case the call is to leave the moment behind and get on to what God has for them to do.

The disciples are so much like us. It is hard not to focus on what is right in front of you, instead of what God might be doing behind the scenes. It is hard not to focus on our dreams and not what God has dreamed. It is hard not to focus on the future when Jesus says focus on today.

Here in our text today, Luke is continuing his story of Jesus. Luke has completed his gospel and now we are told in the introduction of the Book of Acts that this

is a continuation of the story that he has related to Theopholis. The information that Luke is getting to share about is the birthing of the early church and the work of the early church is a continuation of the story of Jesus.

N.T. Wright, in his commentary on Acts, suggests that we must remember that Acts is about Jesus. I would add, we must remember that not only the book of Acts but also all of God’s word is about Jesus. It points to Jesus, it reveals to us Jesus and it gives us the promise of Jesus. Jesus is the center of it all.

A recent article on the church proclaims that what the church must give every emerging generation is Jesus. Jesus has always been the center of it all and most of the time, when we miss the mark in the church it is when Jesus is no longer the center of what we are doing. What we have to offer our culture, our nation, or our world is not a new idea, another value system, or even a certain politic. What we have to offer is Jesus fully and completely. We have to believe ourselves that Jesus is enough.

Luke begins Acts by reminding us that what he is getting ready to share is not another story. It is still the story of Jesus. The story of the church is the story of Jesus.

Wright suggests another level of reading Acts and that is we are invited into the story. The story of Acts is not just a brief early church history. It is the story of Jesus continued and one to which you and I are invited. This two level reading is apparent when we look at the very first chapter. This is about what Jesus is doing His ascension and promise of coming again and it is about the power of the Holy Spirit that has been promised to us.

The disciples, like us, sometimes missed the point. This story is no different. The



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disciples again ask the wrong question. They ask, "Is now the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Now before we are too hard on the disciples, this is the question of all questions for those who were part of Israel and heirs to the promise of God for Israel. Their whole lives they had been told of God's promise of sending God's messiah who would come and reestablish the kingdom of Israel to its rightful place. David's throne would finally have been restored and there would be no end to this kingdom. They had followed Jesus in the first place because He had proclaimed that He was the one who was the Messiah.

When Jesus was put to death on the cross it seemed they had missed it again. The cross meant simply in the moment that another promising messiah movement had ended. It seemed again that the power of the world was more powerful than God. Their hopes were dashed and with the death of Jesus went the hopes of the kingdom of Israel.

However, now things had changed. Jesus was not dead. Jesus was alive and the joy that filled their lives also had to embolden them to believe that this time God's power was greater. Not only was God more powerful, but also now God was going to fulfill His promise to restore the kingdom to Israel. Yet, Jesus' answer is not yours to know the times or the periods that God has set by God's authority. But you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Jesus' response is not that God is not restoring the kingdom. Jesus' response is the timing is not your concern as much as the mission. Jesus' response is to focus on what God has called you to do. God is at work, now you too must get to work. The restoration of the kingdom is God's work and you will be a part.

Jesus did not deny the question. He expanded it. He transformed it. He opened their eyes to what the kingdom of God would truly be. It would not be limited politically or geographically. They were going to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. God was doing much more than they could ever imagine.

It is at this moment Jesus ascends into the heavens and a cloud hides Him from their sight. The question has always been where did Jesus go? Biblically, we know Jesus ascended into heaven. When I use the term heaven, I mean the very dwelling place of God. Jesus used this language. Jesus said He was going to prepare a dwelling place for us. Jesus said He must go to the father, so He could send the Spirit. We know that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father,

the place of authority and is making intercession for you and me. When Stephen is stoned to death, he sees a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father.

Jesus ascends and is gone from their sight and they stand there gazing into heaven. If this were a movie it is at this point the screen would say "The End." But this is not a movie; this is the story of Jesus. The story of Jesus does not end. It has always been and will always be. Jesus is the center of it all and so, the angels proclaim the story continues. This same Jesus will return. The story is not over. It continues and now the disciples and you and me are invited into this incredible story.

A few years ago, Robin and I visited the Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. Many of you have probably been there. It of course is the place where there are hand and footprints of the stars. There are motion picture stars memorialized there for the last century. Some of the greatest stars imprints are there. Marilyn Monroe, John Wayne, Sean Connery, Mary Pickford, Gene Kelly, Judy Garland and Bob Hope. Of course, there are the stars of our day as well. Brad Pitt, Johnny Depp, and of course George Clooney. Robin of course wanted to hold hands with George Clooney. So she found his imprint and placed her hand in the imprint and I took a picture. It was interesting to walk around and compare your footprints to the ones left behind by the stars.

Barbara Lundblad relates in a sermon on this text this story:

Not long ago I saw a wonderful picture of Jesus' ascension. It was a black and white woodcut print finely etched. In the picture Jesus is rising up as the disciples watch Him disappear into the clouds. If you look closely at the picture, not in the clouds, but on the ground, you can see footprints on the earth. The artist has carefully etched Jesus' footprints down on the level where the disciples are standing with their mouths open. Perhaps the artist was simply imagining a homey detail that isn't in the text. Or, perhaps, the artist is pressing us with the old question, "Why do you stand looking up into heaven? Look at these footprints here on the earth." Jesus' muddy footprints are all over the pages of the gospels.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The body of Christ takes up space on the earth." That is, the Body of Christ makes footprints. Bonhoeffer goes on, "A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities, that is all. But the

incarnate Christ needs not only ears or hearts, but living people who will follow Him."

Maybe that is what the angels are saying to the disciples that day as they stood there gazing. Yes, Jesus has ascended into heavens but look what He has left. He has not only left you the way to live, He has not only promised you the power of the Holy Spirit but He has left you and me. Jesus went to heaven, but He left you and me. He left us to follow the footprints and to take up space right here and now as the very body of Christ.

It was time for Jesus to fly and it is time for us to fly as well. However we do not fly away, but we fly to our calling. Where do we find the footprints of Jesus? We find them walking toward those who have never heard the good news. We find them in places where others do not want to go. We find them along dusty rural roads and in the midst of the most crowded city streets. We find them in places of solitude and quiet. We find them in the clamor and business of the office and school. We find them with those who welcome a new baby into the world and with those who sit with those who are on their way to be with Jesus. We find them on the way to the cross and suffering and we find them freshly made in the morning dew on the way out of the tomb toward life and hope.

It is hard for us, just like the disciples. We ask the wrong questions. We look for the wrong things. Interesting the disciples are described here as still necked. Those who refuse to turn and look to that which is important. What if instead of focusing on that which does not matter, that which is over and done, that which we cannot really change, we might look for the footprints of Jesus and follow.

That is why we come to the table of our Lord today. We come to remember His footsteps of Jesus. We come to remember His life, His suffering, and His death. Yet, we also recall that the cross was not the end of the story. God raised Jesus from the dead and He ascended into heaven with this promise... that He was coming again. Until then... follow the footsteps of Jesus.

