

You Are Witnesses...
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – May 21, 2023

Please Read:
Acts 1:6-11
Luke 24:44-53

Last week on Thursday, we celebrated *Ascension Day*, 40 days after Easter, the day according to Luke (Acts 1:3) when Jesus is depicted as leaving the awestruck disciples outside of Jerusalem at Mt. Olivet and is “lifted up” and taken away by a cloud out of their sight. This is where paradoxically Jesus leaves so that his disciples can get on with his work here on planet earth.

Today I am delighted to share with you the triptych over here to my right and your left. The painter, Virginia Isbell, is an American - French artist. She and her husband Carlos move between Uruguay and Paris. She writes this:

“I like the way this painting has travelled through my various worlds, from Uruguay where I now live with my husband Carlos, to France where I have lived most of my life, to the United States where I grew up. After all, we see clouds wherever we go. They travel with us, like God, they look down on us, they protect us. We look up, we aspire, we’re inspired, don’t we look to the skies for meaning? There’s a reason heaven is associated with skies, and clouds are part of that interface. They modulate the light. They can be dark, but there’s always that proverbial silver lining.

Here my silver lining is being present in this congregation, although I’m only on zoom elsewhere. And that like my French mother, who recently passed, the clouds made the journey from Paris to Connecticut, where my father was born and raised and where they met. In the very movement of this Cloudscape, I feel a connection beyond space and time, a spiritual connection, to my parents, to this congregation, to the American Church where I met Scott. It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

Thanks to you, Virginia and Carlos! And to Dan Mason for installing it! As Virginia notes, clouds inspire our wondering, but they are also a biblical symbol of the divine presence. It was in Exodus we read that God’s being with the Hebrew sojourners was manifest as cloud by day and pillar of fire by night.¹

I invite you to consider the connection between Jesus’ being taken up into the clouds away into another dimension with God, and the experience of wonder and awe that brings transformation of our consciousness from one “place” to another. I heard a lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary this past week during my class reunion on the importance of wonder in education. Wonder, even day-dreaming for me happens when I take time to lay back and watch the clouds roll by. Wonder allows us to move from our constructed reality to something else. It doesn’t always happen, but leisure, letting my mind wander, is often when I come up with the best ideas.

I wonder what those disciples experienced when they were looking up and seeing Jesus taken up into the clouds... Perhaps Luke is making a comparison between Jesus and two Old Testament heroes, Moses and Elijah.

¹ See Exodus 13:21-22.

Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai receiving the commandments of God (Exodus 24:18) and then teaching the people of Israel what God expected of them. According to Acts, Jesus spent the 40 days after Easter instructing the disciples more about the Kingdom of God. It was at the *Transfiguration* where we read about Moses and Elijah with Jesus in the clouds on a mountain top... Elijah was “lifted up” to heaven as well... He had to ascend into the clouds so that his disciple Elisha could receive a double portion of his prophetic spirit (2 Kings 2:9). The point is that Luke is connecting Jesus with the new Messianic leadership of the people of God. He is the Anointed One. He is the Savior.

The teaching Jesus gives is counter intuitive. Jesus strangely tells them *to wait*. This is perhaps the most obvious part of the spiritual life that is lost on so many of us in our immediate-gratification, instant-communication, “Let’s do something now!” culture. Many situations in life simply require waiting. Good food, good conversation. Reading. I love the book, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*. I just don’t have time to read it!

Seriously, maybe clouds can be a reminder that we need to stop and wait. Much of life forces waiting upon us: recovery after surgery, the next round of chemo, results of tests, the next job opportunity, a child to be born, or to go off to school, or a loved one receiving hospice care... Waiting is a part of life. The question is, how do we wait?

The lecture by Dr. Christy Lang Hearlson (Villanova) reminded me that we live in a constructed reality based on what we have experienced and what we think we know. But there is a larger reality out there, what educational theorists call the “common reality.” New experiences like travel, or a change in our life circumstances can expand our constructed reality to open us to the common reality. I wonder if Jesus’ leaving wasn’t a way of helping the disciples to experience a portal into a different reality, a time of waiting and wondering?

Jesus promises that the baptism of the Holy Spirit will come. Perhaps here is one of the most important theological truths of the Ascension. Jesus is making space for the Holy Spirit to be the central focus and engine of the life of the Church. This is an insight into the Divine nature of the Trinitarian God. It’s not about grabbing power and taking center stage. It’s about giving power away and making space for others! Jesus needs to leave so that the Holy Spirit may take her rightful place as the Advocate, the One who comes along side of the disciples to fill and teach them and send them forth into the world...

The Spirit of God is the primary agent of transformation. The Spirit pushes us beyond the limits of our constructed vision and understanding. Notice how the disciples are asking about when God will restore the Kingdom to Israel... (Acts 1:7). Jesus’ answer is pointing to a *new paradigm*. The Kingdom is no longer about one religious or ethnic group. It is no longer about one place. Rather, “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And then he leaves.

It is just then in the account when Luke writes, “Suddenly, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?’” In other words, what are you doing here with your hankies in your hand, wishing you could have gone with Jesus, or that he stayed? You have work to do, so get on with it!

And so we do... Did you know that very soon there will be more Christians in China than the United States? Did you know there are 10 times more Christians in China than in Germany, the heart of the Reformation? Did you know that 60% of the “nones” that we so often hear about – those people who say they are not affiliated with any church – 60% say they believe in God. Blaise Pascal would remind us, “the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.”

Jesus says, “you will be my witnesses.” The question is, what kind of “witness” are we giving? Do our lives give witness to the gospel of salvation by grace through faith? Do our lives give witness to the *love of God as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus*? Unfortunately, God’s grace and love are not the first things that come to mind when people think about church! Tim Keller, who died this week after battling pancreatic cancer, was a tremendous witness to the gospel of grace... but his denomination, the PCA, still excludes women from leadership and are hostile to the LGBTQ community...

Here is the paradox of the Ascension: Jesus goes to heaven so that we might expand his grace and love on earth! And it is the Spirit who will help us. It’s counter-intuitive, but as we look up and wait, the Holy Spirit descends upon us so that we might go out to engage Jesus’ ministry of healing loving, repentance and forgiveness, recreating and restoring all creation.

David Brooks says this, “The Gospels brought about a revolution in morals. To put it broadly, there was a shift from a desire for power to a desire for sacrificial love. Even just speaking as a historian of ideas, culture, and behavior, that was a radical revolution that created a radical counterculture. Today when we hear the word counterculture, we think of hippies in the 1960s. But the hippies ultimately represent the same individualistic striving we see from *Apple* computer and *Ben & Jerry’s*. The true counterculture is found in faith... It’s about living by a totally different moral logic. The logic of the Bible and the language of *humility* - that’s the real counterculture.”²

The paradox of faith is when we lift our hearts to the Lord, we prepare to lower ourselves for service, acts of kindness and self-giving, self-sacrificial love. I was deeply moved to learn from missionaries who spoke to our alumni reunion that persecution is up in China right now, but Xiao Li, the speaker said, don’t pray for the persecution to stop. Persecution will grow the church. Pray that we may remain faithful through suffering!

Missionaries know that to give witness to Jesus means to give their lives in sacrificial love. Love involves suffering. It will bring the deepest joy, but it involves at times the pain of laying down your priorities and needs and putting others first. It isn’t a coincidence that the word for witnesses in the Greek is *μαρτυρων*, the same root from which our word *martyr* comes...

A prayer attributed to Teresa of Avila (1515-83) expresses well, I think, the message of faithful witness: “God of love, help us to remember that Christ has no body now on earth but ours, no

² David Brooks: Interview by Jeff Haanen: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/june/david-brooks-we-need-to-start-talking-about-sin-and-righteo.html>

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.”³

So friends, I hope you’ll slow down and take time to look up and enjoy the clouds. But in your waiting, remember soon the Holy Spirit will come to you in power, and *you* will be Christ’s witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, *and New Canaan*, and to the end of the world!” Indeed, “you are witnesses...”

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

³ Teresa of Avila, quoted in Dorothy M. Stewart, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Prayers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 70.