

Don't Just Stand There, Do Something
Acts 1:1-11
Ascension Sunday

I always imagine it was a beautiful day.

After all, why would Jesus and his disciples, recently reunited after a terrible experience, be out walking in the countryside if the weather was bad?

I imagine that, more than a clear blue sky, there must have been a breeze off the Sea of Galilee, wildflowers blooming everywhere they looked . . . that day was a day of starting over, getting back (finally) to the way things used to be before all the recent and horribly dark events of the last few weeks. They'd lived through, don't forget, political controversy, Jesus' arrest and torture, a violent crucifixion, burial and resurrection. I mean, these were not experiences one would just "get over," and I am sure all of the disciples carried their own horrifying memories, the trauma of fear, anger, and regret over what they'd lived through the last preceding weeks.

Unlike most humans who grieve a death, however, Jesus' disciples must have felt like they'd won the lottery. They'd lived through it all and carried their heavy, heavy regrets until, unbelievably, Jesus had risen from the dead.

Jesus came back.

He'd appeared to them in their hiding place, their locked upper room; he'd met them on the beach; and according to Luke's report here in Acts, he'd given them "many convincing proofs" and talked to them over and over for forty days about the same thing: the coming kingdom of God.

And now, on this day Luke recounts, Jesus finally walked with them again, up and down the rolling hills of Galilee, with the breeze blowing and the sun shining just enough for everyone to begin to believe that the pain was all behind them . . . that even with the trauma they'd just lived through, maybe, possibly, *hopefully* . . . things just might begin to get back to normal. They weren't sure, of course, how this whole crucifixion trauma tied into their hopes for Jesus the political hero who might deliver them from Rome's oppressive rule, but as long as things were getting back to the way they'd known them, then they were definitely along for the ride.

And, according to Luke, it seemed that that day on Galilee's hillside was starting out to be just that.

As they walked along behind Jesus, they must have smiled knowingly and reassuringly at each other as they collectively hoped for what they knew to be normal, returned, and listened to him go on and on about the kingdom of God, as usual. Undoubtedly, they hoped beyond hope that things were finally returning to what they'd known before, that they had somehow, inexplicably, cheated death and could move on to whatever was next for their dynamic leader.

They listened to him preach that day, not really understanding him . . . but then again, what was new about that? I imagine that they just nodded appreciatively and thanked their lucky stars that things were back on track.

And, just like they remembered, there was a time that afternoon when Jesus would stop preaching and they could ask questions. When that time came, they took the opportunity because, as you might imagine, they had so many questions.

When, they asked?

When would this kingdom come to be?

It was a reasonable question, given all they had been through. They wanted to know: now that you have shown the Roman rulers who's boss and put the leaders of the temple in their rightful places, when is what we've all come to expect going to happen? When will you become the guy in charge and all of us, your faithful followers, distinguished members of your cabinet? When? We saw you conquer death . . . what more could be left?

We have a list on our family bulletin board, tacked up in the fall of last year, listing what was then an interminably long recitation of school days we'd have to survive. And this survival is not just for the kids in our family. Parents, too, also have an investment in the diminishment of the list, because we are the ones who have to drive carpool and supervise science projects and keep track of field trips. Everyday, first thing upon returning home from school, one of the kids takes a pen and crosses out the day that has just been finished. And, little by little, one by one, the days have disappeared. Recently when I looked at the list, longing for the end of early morning trips to school, I counted that there were only fifteen days left. Fifteen days! It was the answer to my school-year-long question of when my exile as early morning delivery service would end. When??!? And now I know—fifteen days to go, we're almost there, it's almost over

I love knowing how much more I have to endure, so I can't blame the disciples for asking what seems to me to be a most logical, reasonable question. *We've been your faithful followers for some time now. How much longer will we have to live on the fringe of*

society, believing and hoping that everything you tell us about the kingdom of God will actually come to be? When, Jesus? We want to know . . . we need to know.

But as they asked the burning question of when this would all come to be, and he answered them . . . something about being his witnesses to the whole earth . . . , he suddenly started floating, rising up into the sky, away from them, away from them all over again.

What???!?

You can imagine their confusion and downright horror. They'd lived through crucifixion, against all odds. They were ready to follow him to whatever was next. And then . . . away he went. Away.

Unbelievably, there they were on the hillsides of Galilee hands cupping their eyes, staring up into a brilliant blue sky, trying desperately to understand what Jesus was up to now.

And then he was gone.

Given all they had been through and all the circumstances surrounding that day, I have to admit that if I had been among the group of disciples there I also would have stared, mouth gaping open, at the clouds in the sky and the wisp left behind as Jesus ascended.

And . . . I might have been just a little bit mad.

Where did Jesus think he was going, just as the tide had started to turn and their political hopes were rising? Where did he think he was going after all the grief and pain they had all experienced? How could he leave them after all they'd been through?

This turn of events is commonly known in standard church parlance as a festival called, The Day of Ascension. 2000 years of tradition have led us to turn this event into a feast day. But all I can think of

when I read it is how those disciples must have felt when Jesus left—
Maybe abandoned? At a loss? Unsure of what to do next?

That's how I would feel, I'll admit.

But Luke uses this event to begin his story of the first Christian church, telling the story of the first church in the book of Acts in the form of a letter for his student and friend, Theophilus. What could Luke have been thinking? What could this turn of events possibly mean, other than utter devastation in the lives of people who had already been traumatized beyond reason?

William Loader, an Australian Baptist theologian and Biblical scholar, suggests that Luke starts with this story because the poignant image of the disciples, crowded together on that mountaintop, is a strong representation of the ongoing question of modern Christ-followers, a question that must be answered over and over again with every generation that dares to embrace the Christian message.

You heard what the disciples want to know: "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" For years they had been following him around listening to him talk about the restoration of the kingdom, hope for the oppressed, comfort for those who are living with grief.

They wanted to know—*we love the message you've been preaching. After all we've been through, is now the time you have in mind to "show us the money,"* as it were?

2000 years later, having heard the message of Jesus and attaching our lives to its promise, we also wrestle with this question. We read these events and beg again, "Don't leave us by floating off into heaven. Please . . . stick around and bring this kingdom you talk about so often into tangible and stark reality. Please . . . because we

are pinning all our hopes on this healing and promise. Please don't leave us . . . we want to know: *is this the time when everything you taught us about God's healing and transforming presence in the world will really come to be?* We want to know . . . we need to know, because believing is hard and we just don't know how much longer we can keep it up."

It has become the custom of some Christian traditions to assess the situation in which we find ourselves—2000 years after Jesus' ascension—and take the position that our obligation as modern-day followers of Jesus is to stand staring up at the sky.

We talk about heaven like it's the best all-inclusive resort we can imagine.

We pine for a heavenly reality wholly other than the one we live in. We long grab onto the hem of Jesus' robe, floating up to the sky to a place in which all our worldly cares will be insignificant.

And . . . because we love to join the disciples in a dreamy, heavenly focus, as an organized church, an institutional expression of what Jesus came to teach us, we have tended to neglect what's going on right here on earth.

After all, what's the point when we all know we'll be headed off to glory sometime soon anyway?

In her book [Traveling Mercies](#), Anne Lamott writes movingly about the death of her best friend Pam. After Pam's death Anne and her son Sam went away for a few days to the beach, where Anne says she cried a lot behind her sunglasses and wished the inside of her snorkeling mask had windshield wipers. The grief she felt was so

debilitating she couldn't imagine how she might ever resume normal life.

During her various forays to the beach and the pool Anne noticed a man also vacationing there who only had one leg. He'd remove his prosthetic leg to go swimming and she'd noticed it lying next to the pool. One day Anne happened to see the man, prosthetic leg laying on the ground again, nimbly climbing a trapeze ladder at the afternoon circus school held behind the haciendas. The man climbed the ladder, she writes, "with disjointed grace, asymmetrical but not clumsy, rung by rung, focused and steady and slow. Then he reached the platform, put on his safety harness, and swung out over the safety net, his one leg hooked over the bar of the trapeze, swinging back and forth, and finally letting go. A teacher on the other trapeze swung toward him, and they caught each other's hands and held on, and they swung back and forth for awhile. Then he dropped on his back to the safety net and raised his fist in victory. "Yes," he said, and lay there on the net for a long time, looking at the sky with a secret smile."

Anne says she shyly approached him, complimented him on his fortitude and asked if he was going to do the trapeze again. He said, "Honey? I got so much bigger mountains to climb."

The next day Anne saw his plastic leg lying on a beach towel at the far end of the beach, where the wind surfing lessons take place. And she thought of the words of the Persian mystical poet Rumi, who wrote: "Where there is ruin, there is hope for treasure." (Traveling Mercies, p. 74-76)

When the Day of Ascension had come, Jesus led the disciples up to the top of a hill and was talking to them about this elusive, strange concept he kept prattling on and on about: *the kingdom of God*. When they asked him to tell them when, he answered with a rather puzzled response . . . what do you mean when will it come? It's coming to be right here and now, and after today you will receive power from the Holy Spirit to be my witnesses here and in all of Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. The kingdom of God is not something far-off or other-worldly . . . it's something that's coming to be right here and now. How could you have missed what I have been telling you this whole, entire time?

But still, they did.

And still, we do.

All of us, in some form or another, stand there gazing at the blue, empty sky, trying to get our minds around the fact that Jesus, this one we have come to believe is God among us . . . is gone.

For the first disciples it took two angels, the angels some of them had seen at the tomb, to descend from the sky and shake them out of their reverie and tell them plainly that standing around staring into heaven was not going to bring about the kingdom Jesus had been describing this whole time. The angels told the first disciples it was time for them to stop just standing there . . . to stop cowering in fear . . . to stop running for cover, denying they knew him, feigning misunderstanding when he asked them to step up. Why are you standing there looking up into heaven? Don't just stand there . . . *do something!*

For us, modern day disciples far too sophisticated to stare at the sky looking for angels . . . I wonder what it will take?

I wonder just what we need to stop all the rhetoric about the “not yet” and get busy with Jesus’ invitation to change the world, little by little, starting right here and right now?

It’s a strange way for Dr. Luke to start the story of the first church, but it’s not the only story of our faith that begins in a strange way. Come to think of it, everything about Jesus, God come to earth, is completely framed within the unbelievable—unlikely, even. The core of Jesus’ message was one of turning everything we expected on its head. He taught us to welcome strangers, to feed the hungry, to love our enemies. He said when this kingdom started to come to be, the weeping would dance with joy and the oppressed would experience freedom and those who lived crippled with an absence of hope would begin, unbelievably, to anticipate the future.

So it shouldn’t surprise us that what we expected—what even the first disciples expected—was not in any way what God had in mind.

No waiting around for the coming of a lofty reality we can only imagine.

No grandstand view from the sidelines, during which we debate who among us would be the most important of all.

No standing there, gaping at an empty sky, wondering what miraculous fix Jesus will show up with now.

I don’t know why Jesus had to leave. I suppose in some ways it would have been reassuring to have him here, even now, walking us through the reality of his message and hoping, like the first disciples, that despite our seeming denseness, eventually we might catch on.

But maybe it was with an empty sky, with Jesus' handing of the baton to us, that the story of God's kingdom come to earth finally, really began.

And begin it did, as those disciples turned away from that clear, blue sky, swallowed their fear, and set out to start bringing the kingdom Jesus taught them about into full and tangible reality.

The question for us is, then, the same question they faced that day. Will we just stand there, gazing at an empty sky, wondering who will come to bail us out next?

Or . . . will we turn from the wisp of smoke we see, remember the strong message of Jesus, then use our own little lives to make it happen?

After all, we wouldn't want to just stand there. The message of Jesus compels us to get out there and . . . *do something*.

Amen.

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