

Ascension Sunday
May 8, 2016

"LOOKING UP AND LOOKING OUT"

by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 1:1-11 ~ Luke 24:44-53

Well, I look a little foolish, don't I ... standing here gazing upward? But isn't that what we come here to do on Sundays? Aren't we here to look up to heaven to see if we might spot Jesus? Even if he's disappeared from our sight, don't we come here and try to find him, sort of like a spiritual *Where's Waldo?* We figure, Jesus must be here some place ... if we only look hard enough. But he can be hard to see on a Sunday morning in May. Where's Jesus?

Oh, sometimes when we can't look *up* and see Jesus ... we look *back* to find him in the past. Our thoughts linger on better days in our spiritual journey ... a time when the pews were full and the crowds were enthusiastic. We look back to a church somewhere else where we felt so connected with God ... a pastor who made us feel loved ... some friends we really enjoyed who are gone now. And we think, *"Lord, is this time when you will restore the kingdom?"* Will you bring back the good old days now, or is that all gone forever? Will I ever feel close to you again like I did back then?

According to Luke and Acts, some forty days after the resurrection, Jesus gathered his disciples one last time on the Mount of Olives. One last time he commissioned them to be his witnesses in the world. The disciples were filled with apocalyptic expectation. Before Jesus ever appeared, they had believed that God would send a Messiah like King David from Israel's good old days ... a Messiah who would kick out the Romans ... crush the neighboring nation bullies ... and restore the Kingdom of Israel to its glory of old. They were disappointed when Jesus resisted this military role and preached peace. The disciples just didn't get it. Jesus wasn't about dominating people. He was about empowering them. *"Lord, is this time when you will restore the kingdom?"* Jesus brushes the question aside. *"Leave that up to God,"* he says. He says, *"Here are your instructions. Wait for the Spirit I promised. Then you will be my witnesses to Jerusalem (meaning: everywhere people gather in cities), to Judea (meaning: every nation you call home), to Samaria (meaning: every despised and rejected group of people), and to the uttermost ends of the earth (meaning: everybody, everywhere, always). This is your job, and I'll help you do it. I'll be right beside you always, all the way, whenever you are doing your witness work in the world."*

"You will be my witnesses." Does this scripture apply to us, or was it only for those few gathered on that mountain top long ago? Did Jesus mean, you are the elite, you are the apostles, and these orders are just for you ... or did he intend to describe what he wanted his disciples in every age to do? Well, you know what I think the answer is. I don't believe in an elite few who get special favors from God. God doesn't play favorites. God includes everybody, and we are all equals before God. I think these marching orders for his disciples were intended for everyone who chooses to be Jesus' disciples ... so they were also intended for us.

"You" - meaning us! - "will be my" - meaning Jesus! - "witnesses." A witness reports what he has seen ... what she has heard ... what he knows ... what has already taken place. But we weren't there, so how can we be a witness of Jesus? Instead of witnesses, we've been more like court reporters, reading back the testimony of the witnesses who were actually there. We tell the story of Jesus that they told us. We talk about his birth in a stable and the way he amazed the teachers in the Temple. We tell how he was baptized by John in the Jordan and called some people to be his disciples. We analyze his teachings and celebrate his healings. We especially remember how he suffered on the cross and how he rose from the dead. But we didn't see any of it happen ourselves. So actually, we bear witness to the witnesses who saw and heard what Jesus did and said.

But maybe Jesus intended that his disciples should *not* just be witnesses testifying to what happened *once upon a time*, but witnesses watching *what he is doing now*. Maybe Jesus was trying to help these disciples on the Mount of Olives that day to get freed from just *looking back* to the good old days when he was the amazing carpenter from Nazareth ... and to look *forward instead* to what he was about to do among them. What if Jesus was saying, *"In the next days and weeks and years, I want you to pay attention. Be alert. Watch what's going on. See if you can tell what I'm up to. I want you to go out into the world and observe how I am working everywhere in the lives of people to bring them God's love. I want you to name what is happening in the human family when you see it. I want you to testify to the mighty acts of healing and grace I am still doing and tell the truth as you see it."*

Then Jesus ascends up into the clouds out of their sight. They stand there looking for the longest time ... until two men in white robes clear their throats and tap them on the shoulder. Who are these two men in white robes? Are they Moses and Elijah from the Mount of Transfiguration? Are they the two angels from the empty tomb? Or are they just two guys who were walking by and want to save them some embarrassment?

It's funny, it's pathetic, it's instructional, all at the same time, and don't you know it's meant for us, too. "Why are you just standing around here looking up at the sky? Don't you have some work to do? Jesus will be back, but didn't he give you something that he told you to do in the meantime? You better get going!" So, instead of *looking up* ... or *looking back* ... to find Jesus, we should be *looking forward* ... we should be *looking out* to see the risen Christ.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't stop and gaze heavenward from time to time. Like most everyone, I get down at times. I need to be still and know that God is God. I need to lift my downcast eyes and realize that God is bigger than all my problems. I need to see the beauty of the sky and the radiance of the stars and catch my breath. I need to aspire for the heights, and I won't do that unless I stop my frantic activity long enough to feed my soul and commune with God. But we are tempted to make our spirituality an entirely vertical exercise. We fix our eyes on the heavens, and we don't see the earth. If our faith is all about *looking up* to God, then we don't have to *look out* at the people who are hurting ... and needing Christ in *us* ... to bring them healing and justice. If we're always *looking up* to see God, then we don't have to *look out* to the hard places of human need where Christ is at work and waiting for us to join him.

The same is true of our *looking back* for God. It's good for us to hold our precious memories ... to remember the saints who have gone before us ... to tell the old, old story. In those times when we feel low and God seems far away, looking back to those moments when God seemed so near

to us encourages us to keep going. But when our faith becomes sentimental and nostalgic ... stuck in some romanticized good old day long gone ... then we turn our backs on the fresh winds of the Spirit that might revive us. We re-bury Jesus in the tomb of the past, and live as if he were dead to us now. Our memories should encourage us with hope, not lead us to despair. Of what use is it for us to speak of the time when God was with us, unless it opens our eyes to see how God is *still* with us, and *still* speaking to us ... now and tomorrow?

What does it mean for us to be witnesses to the risen Christ in Eagle River, WI in the year of our Lord 2016? It means telling the story of Jesus and being witnesses to the witnesses who saw him with their own eyes and heard him with their own ears ... because the Jesus of this story is the same one whose Spirit moves among us still. It means engaging people in spiritual discourse. It means looking at life through the eyes of faith and articulating what you see Christ doing in the world today. It means telling someone what the Lord has done for you.

And sometimes it means giving *subversive counter-testimony* to the prevailing point of view. When the culture in which we live tells its chapter and verse, we offer the Christian sub-verse. *Their* testimony is, we are heading into hard times and we better do whatever it takes to keep big businesses strong because our nation's strength depends on the Fortune 500. *Our* sub-verse is that we must put clear boundaries on those businesses that are tempted to see labor as just so much expendable capital and to sacrifice the environment for the sake of profit, because the strength of our nation is not our corporations but our people and our land. *Their* testimony is, we have a nation of equal opportunity ... that the "American Dream" is possible for everyone ... and that laziness is the only limit to success. *Our* Christian sub-verse is that after all the rhetoric and all the struggles of the past, a white male born in the middle class ... or above ... still has a twenty yard head start in the hundred yard dash to prosperity ... while some people have blocks of concrete called poverty, malnutrition, discrimination, and exploitation tied to their feet. *Our* Christian sub-verse is that every child is a child of God and we will treat them so. While the world asks, "Who will protect my access to the good life?" we are asking, "Who will help us feed these hungry people?"

Such subversive Christian testimony is important because it keeps us sane when the world is going crazy ... it acknowledges the truth when our society lives the lie. Our Christian witness reminds us of who we are... and offers the world a lifesaving antidote to the poisons of materialism, violence, and the abuse of power.

I have had the privilege of listening to some great African American preaching. I love the participatory, talk-back style of preacher and people in that tradition. The preacher would say, "Can I get an `amen'?" And the people would say? ("*Amen!*") The preacher would say, "Can I get a `hallelujah'?" And the people would say? ("*Hallelujah!*") The preacher would say, "Can I get a `Thank you Jesus'?" And the people would say? ("*Thank you, Jesus!*") (Well, our rhythm's off, but maybe with a little practice we could get the hang of it!) But my favorite moment is when the preacher makes a point and then says, "Can I get a witness?" He's asking, "Will you verify my preaching here? Have you had this experience of God, too? Are we formed into the Christ community by this common encounter with God, or is it only my imagination?" And the people respond with "Amen!" and "That's right!" and "Testify!" because they are preaching right along with the person behind the pulpit and giving witness to the presence of the risen Christ in their own lives.

The first commandment Jesus gave us was *"Follow me!"* The greatest commandment Jesus reminded us of was *"Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor and love each other, too."* The last commandment Jesus gave before he was taken from our sight was, *"Be my witnesses. Watch what I am doing among you. And then tell it! Tell it! Tell it! Let your voice be heard above all the other voices that cry evil ... above all the other voices that cry despair ... above all the other voices that take my name in vain to bludgeon people they don't like. Testify to the world that Jesus Christ is risen and that God is love. And I will be with you."*

You and I can't speak for God. What an arrogant presumption that would be! And we can't be witnesses of what we have not experienced for ourselves. But we can insert into the world's vain chatter and noisy conversations a discourse of the Spirit that calls humanity to *look up* and see God, and then to *look out* and see all the people God sees ... especially those that the principalities and powers prefer to keep invisible. We can at least be the expert witnesses on what Jesus has done for us. Our subversive Christian testimony is that there *is* reason to hope ... that there *is* more to this world than wealth ... and that evil *doesn't* get the last word. We can testify that a loving God is in control ... that the risen Christ is with us still ... that God's Spirit is moving across the face of the deep to begin a new creation. God guarantees an ultimate justice for all ... because when all is said and done ... God's love will last forever.

That's our testimony, counter-testimony, and subversion. So let's tell it! Tell it where people make decisions in the councils of power. Tell it where children suffer hunger and catch their parent's hopelessness. Tell it where violence robs people's peace. Be his witnesses, for Christ's sake! That's what Jesus told us to do. That's what Jesus promised to empower us to do. That's what Jesus said would help us see ... that he is with us always, right up to the end of the world.

Oh, yes! Can I get a witness?

May we pray?

Jesus, Savior, make us your witnesses. Give us courage to stand up with you. Give us wisdom to know the words inciting spiritual discourse. Give us clear vision ... forward and outward ... where you are at work ... that our testimony might not be hearsay twenty centuries old, but our own original encounter with you. Make us your witnesses by the power of your Spirit, for Jesus' sake. Amen.