

Looking to the Future By Holly C. W. Aastuen
May 16, 2010 Acts 1:1-11 Confirmation Sunday

(Looking up) "As 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.'"

(Still looking up) Do you see anything yet?

This story of the ascension is one of the key reasons that the Christians of first century Palestine believed that Christ would come again, and would come again in their lifetime. And because they believed that Christ's second coming was soon, they lived with the abandon and intensity that only new Christians on a mission can live. They gave away what they owned and kept everything in common, giving to those who had need, and receiving from many more. They lived communally and used the support of the fellowship to minister to those who hadn't heard about Jesus Christ. Their mission was urgent because Christ was coming again and coming again soon.

(Looking up) Do you see anything yet?

It would have been easier in some respects if that had been true, if Jesus had come again in their lifetimes and had brought about the end of the world, there would have been no puzzling over what those dazzling men meant, there would have been no second guessing when the original hearers of these words died, there would have been no number of wars and murders and pillaging in the name of Christ, that has come in the centuries following Jesus' first coming.

Then again, we would never have been born, we would not have heard the good news and we would not have had the privilege of being here on this day.

This is Confirmation Sunday, after all, the Sunday that our eighth graders confirm the vows made at their baptism, the Sunday that we reaffirm our vows made at our own baptism that we will follow Jesus with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength.

And what a blessing this day is. These three confirmation students along with the seventh graders have been a true joy. They are enthusiastic about Quiz Bowls, eager volunteers for the skits and ask the most interesting questions. Let me tell you a little more about these eighth graders.

First, we have Claire Steffenhagen. The name Claire means 'clear, bright, famous' and that she is. Her clear voice has been heard many times in this sanctuary as she reads scripture, appears in a skit, or sings songs in the musical. She is a bright person, eager to learn, thoughtful and persistent.

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Linnea Roehlkepartain. Linnea means flower, specifically a particular flower that grows in the mountains. Linnea is beautiful like a flower—inside and out. She is her own person, artistic, intelligent, inquisitive. She is someone who is definitely worth getting to know.

Shelby Mack. What can you say about Shelby? His name means willow from the sheltered place. If you have ever seen Shelby sit on a couch, the bending of a willow may come to mind. I have never seen someone sit in so many different positions as Shelby. He is a flexible person in body and spirit and is always willing to go with the flow.

What a privilege it has been to be with these students these last two years, learning more about them as we together learn more about God and the Bible.

But as bright and artistic and flexible as these youth are, I don't want us to mistakenly pin our hopes for the future on them alone. Though the youth are the future of the church as well as its present, we, too, have a call to clarify our own faith.

The intent of this Ascension story is not only to testify to the reality of Jesus as Lord, but to emphasize that in the absence of Jesus' physical presence; it is fully up to those who are left to testify to Jesus' story, which is now their story and ours. As one commentary puts it: "Christians are not only to follow Jesus in the way they live their lives, by adopting his priorities and continuing to serve others as he did; they are also called to declare verbally why it is that they live that way." (The People's New Testament Commentary by Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock)

It's up to us now. Even as the disciples sought the Holy Spirit until Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came to them in a powerful way, we are in a time where we seek the guidance Holy Spirit, to help us learn, share and grow in our faith.

The question of the angels, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" directs our attention back to the things of earth. It focuses us on the question: What now?

'What now' is we need to get going on all that Jesus taught. We are to adopt Jesus' priorities as our priorities, to adopt Jesus' message as our message, to live as Christ-like a life as we can both in prayer and action, and tell others why we are doing something so counter-cultural.

It's counter-cultural to have faith. It's counter-cultural to believe that something we can't see or feel is alive and working in this world for the good of those in the world.

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Faith is a counter-cultural optimism about God. Faith believes that God is an active force in this world and through faith we can catch some of that force for good in our world.

And God has chosen us, as flawed as we are, to be the representatives of that force of God, that force for good, that force of love.

Peter Gomes points out in his commentary that the event has both an upward vision and a downward vision. The upward vision is heaven: "I go to prepare a place for you." In the midst of the troubles of this world, we want to be lifted up—we need an upward vision.

But there is also a downward vision, expressed by the question, "Why are you looking up toward heaven?" In other words, there is more to do. Put your hand to the plow, be faithful and Jesus will return in due time. In the meantime, immerse yourself in the daily life of this world.

In the end, what is essential to our faith is what we find in our relationship with God. We don't look to the clouds above for our salvation, we don't look to the youth as our salvation. We all, youth and adults together, look to God through prayer, through service, through action as we are looking to the future of our faith, our church, our life.

Let us pray.

Beloved Christ, as we remember your ascension, we also remember that you are the way, the truth and the life. As we look to the future and our future, help us to seek you first in all that we do. Help us to look into our own hearts and minds as we seek to daily walk with you.

Give us the insight we crave and the vision we need so that we may love and serve you now and far into the future. In your name we pray. Amen.