

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight... and they were gazing up toward heaven...” (Acts 1:8-10).

Many years ago, our family had the privilege of being at the John F. Kennedy Space Center to watch a launch of the Space Shuttle Endeavor. There are many details from that day I will never forget. The dramatic countdown to launch, the bright flash of light emerging from beneath the orbiter as the rocket engines ignited, the thunderous roar that literally shook the ground beneath our feet as Endeavor lifted off the launch pad, and the meandering plume of smoke that remained in the sky long after the shuttle had vanished from sight. The communal excitement of those gathered that day was palpable. There we were from all walks of life, from different parts of the planet, staring up at the sky, caught up in the wonder of what we had just experienced.

I can imagine a similar scene as Jesus’ friends were staring up at the sky after he had suddenly departed from them on a cloud from on high. Though I’m fairly certain there were no bright lights or thunderous roars that day, we know by their reaction that none of Jesus’ friends had ever seen anything like this before. It’s not everyday your friend gets airlifted out by a cloud before your very eyes. So, they did what anyone would do in such an otherworldly event. They stared into space.

Perhaps they were experiencing awe and wonder that day. There might have even been sadness at seeing their best friend disappear from their sight. Whatever the case, we’re told that the disciples were looking in the wrong place as indicated by the two men who had suddenly appeared beside them,

“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 to into heaven.” (Acts 1:11).

In other words, Jesus has not been taken out of this world. He is very much in this world and you are the ones who will bear that presence. If you’re looking for God, don’t look up. Look around!

I believe the mission of the church is that simple: To be Jesus’ presence in the world. We’re not waiting for our ticket to ride to some other worldly, ethereal place. We are grounded in the One who took on earthly flesh as he healed and fed; as he proclaimed liberty to the captive; as he challenged the deadly powers of religion and empire. Jesus was flesh and blood and was grounded in the earth; and so too are we.

In his book, We Wish You Much Joy, by Frederick Trost (*Jonathan Trost’s brother*), this reality of Jesus is stated most clearly.

“The mission of the Church is meant to be lived, not off in the clouds or at the periphery of life, but in the thick of its places where Jesus is found alongside the woman at the well, in the home of Zacchaeus the outcast, in public places where the cock crows and thirty pieces of silver mark a betrayal, where the principalities and powers wash their hands of responsibility for justice, where crucifixion of Christ is a daily thing. The mission of the Church is meant to be lived where God’s tears fall upon the savaged ground” (p.119).

So, the question for us is simple. Will Incarnate Word be an out of this world church, staring up in the sky? Or will we live into our name, by rolling up our sleeves and getting to work in and for the world, doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God?

Peace and Love,
Pastor Doug