

Why do you stand looking into heaven?

Acts 1:1-11

May 16, 2010

I have recently become a fan of the television show “Ghost Whisperer.” For those of you unfamiliar with the show it is about a young woman, Miranda, who can see the ghost of the departed. They have remained earth bound because they believe they have unfinished business and therefore refuse to go into the “light” that is available to them. Miranda acts as a mediator for the living and the dead in order to help the ghosts finish their business here on earth so that they can move into the next life found on the other side of the light and also so that the living can get on with their lives here on earth. The ghosts on almost all of the shows ask her what awaits them on the other side of the light and each time she says, “I don’t know, I just know it’s where you belong now.” Sometimes she’ll even add “I know you’ll like it there.” Shows like this succeed not because of the writing. They succeed because of our fascination with a life after death. We are fascinated with the idea of heaven, the heavenly realm, the realm of God, the place where Jesus sits at the right hand of God.

The Ascension story found both at the conclusion of the gospel of Luke and at the beginning of Acts in our reading for today both tell the story of Jesus’ ascent into heaven. In Luke we find, “While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven.” (24:51) And from Acts, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven.” (11:11) Both texts are bidirectional in that we find them pointing “upward” to heaven while addressing the “downward” earthbound position of those watching Jesus’ ascent. Our bidirectional view comes from our dreaming of and hoping for the realities of a heaven freeing us from our suffering and our labor here on earth. To dream of heaven is to remain hopeful that the harsh realities of this life will come to an end. To believe in heaven is to believe that God’s justice will reign and those who have been oppressed, marginalized, or otherwise wronged will

be vindicated in the judgment of Jesus the Christ. We like to think that heaven is the place where only the “good people” get to go. Let us hope my sisters and brothers of Peace that there is room there for us also.

Some theologians and many others believe it folly to even speculate about heaven’s existence. Yet that is what we do. Enquiring minds want to know. I received a call from someone this week because she had been asked “How do we know that heaven really exists? If heaven does exist does that mean that I am gonna have to share heaven even with those people who are car/suicide bombers? How can heaven possibly be big enough to house all the people that have been on earth and died and those who continue to be born?” Very valid questions, indeed; however, “the knowledge of heaven is not for us, at least not yet, and that is why we have been given the idea and the imagery, and the vivid descriptions, and that is why [on this day in which we acknowledge the] Ascension we must give some thought to the idea, for that is where we are told Jesus now is.”<sup>1</sup> In the process, though, we must remember that we are earthbound and that requires something of us. We are the hands and feet of Jesus upon the earth.

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Perhaps it is easier for us to look up toward heaven than to see our sisters and brothers around us who are homeless, hungry, and hurting. It is easier to look toward heaven than to acknowledge the violence happening around us. It is easier to look toward heaven than to acknowledge that homophobia, racism and all the other isms that are prevalent today still divide and weaken us. It is easier to look up toward heaven than to become outraged at the continued destruction of natural habitats displacing and killing the creatures found within them and the total annihilation of some species of plant life.

Standing and looking upward is easier than doing what is asked of us at times.

“Whenever Christians place our focus on looking for Jesus up in the clouds rather than doing the work of the church, we should ask ourselves, “people of Peace UCC, why do you stand looking

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Gomes. “The Absent and the Present Christ” found in *“Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living”* pgs 93-4

up toward heaven?...Like the disciples, we've been called to stop being so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good."<sup>2</sup>

For another perspective on this, listen to some of the words from Johnny Cash's song, "No Earthly Good":

*Come heed me my brothers come heed one and all  
Don't brag about standing or you'll surely fall  
You're shinin' your light and shine it you should  
But you're so heavenly minded you're no earthly good  
If you're holdin' heaven, then spread it around  
There's hungry hands reaching up here from the ground  
Move over and share the high ground where you stood  
so heavenly minded you're no earthly good.  
The gospel ain't gospel until it is spread  
but how can you share it where you've got your head?  
Come hear me good sisters you're salt of the earth  
If your salt isn't salted then what is it worth  
You could give someone a cool drink if you would  
You're so heavenly minded and you're no earthly good.*<sup>3</sup>

Let us remember, "the Ascension is not so much about the mystery of Jesus being lifted up to heaven. Rather, it is about his 'making space so the mission of the church can begin.'"<sup>4</sup> The church could begin to care for the homeless, feed the hungry, and care for the poor, widowed, orphaned and those in prisons as we are called to do today. The church could be a voice for the oppressed and marginalized and speak against the injustices present in society as we are called to do today. The church could begin the work of living into the gospel message as we are called to do today.

The gospel message of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. Now I know that some folks find it difficult to love themselves and therefore inflict their anger, hurt, frustrations and pains upon others. God has provided therapy, medications, and the love of others in the world to help these folks. We are called to love. "We are called to love life 'for the time being.' We are not permitted the luxury of gazing at Jesus' feet. No, we must get on with Jesus' work, and so it

---

<sup>2</sup> Marci Auld Glass. "Earthly Good" [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com) 5/16/2010

<sup>3</sup> Johnny Cash. "No Earthly Good"

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Glass quoting David S. Cunningham in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2 (WJK, KY 2008) p 522.

is our vision of the world that is to be --- that calls us to service in the world that is: a world without Christ, a world that is impoverished in spirit, and that daily devises more means to make life increasingly nasty, brutish and short. We cannot remain on the mountaintop; we must [be willing to give witness to our neighbors in Stevens Point and to all other persons that we encounter].”<sup>5</sup> We must be willing to wait and to work for glory. So how do we do this?

“God has given us three things with which to carry on until [Jesus] shall come again. [Our Creator] has given us the Spirit, the comforter who is the remembrance of what was and the sign of what is to be while she aids us in managing what is. The comforter: the one who strengthens and fortifies. That is the gift we celebrate on Pentecost. [God] has also given us the Church, the body of fellowship whose sacraments, word, and ministry transcend the boundaries of time and the frailties of the human condition; and [God] has given us one another, imperfect though we may be.”<sup>6</sup> The work we do as the church is led, empowered, and directed by the Holy Spirit. So the work we do to be some earthly good does not have to make us weary. As earthbound people we must labor in reading scripture, labor in both daily prayer and the listening to our still speaking God, and labor in love of our neighbor and in caring for all of God’s creation.

Until such time that the upward and downward realities cease to be divided, who or what shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall the judgments of others, economic hardship, illness, war or other distresses separate us from the One who loves us? No, in our faith journey we are more than conquerors. And as hopeful people who are heavenly bound while seeking to be earthly good we can take comfort in the teaching from Romans: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NRSV; 8:38-9) Let us get on with the work of Jesus and be about the business of living and laboring in this time and space. Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Gomes, p. 96

<sup>6</sup> Ibid