

NOW THE GREEN BLADE RISES: Being an Easter People in a Good Friday World *A People for this World*

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Acts 1:4-11

While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and 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."

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Acts 1:9-11

Last week, I asked us to ponder Jesus' question: "Do you want to be made well?" (John 5:6). And when it comes to healing and wholeness, this question is essential: "Do you want to be made well?" Today, I am asking us to ponder another question, also lifted from our sacred scriptures: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

Questions are always a good place to begin our journey with God. And I would even suggest that asking the right questions is often the most important thing we can do in our efforts to know and experience God more fully, more deeply. As Rilke implored: "Live the questions!"

"Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

I can't think of a better question to explore for us who call ourselves Christian today. For too long now, the emphasis of our Christian life together has been on heaven: about going to heaven after you die; about heaven being the reward of salvation; about buying your fire insurance so you can be assured of a heavenly home and stay out of hell; about heaven as a place to see and be with those dearly beloved ones who have died before us; about heaven being the place of escape from the sufferings and troubles of this world; about Jesus coming again for a second time to take us out of this world so that we can be with him in heaven. Truth to tell, a lot...perhaps way too much...emphasis has been placed on heaven. And our focus on heaven has skewed our spiritual pursuits on earth.

Now don't get me wrong. I believe in heaven. I trust that there is "eternal life in God's realm which has no end" as our statement of faith sings. I have a deep and abiding trust that we come from God and to God we will return, and that heaven is indeed all a part of God's wonderful and amazing grace. All I am saying today is that perhaps we can say too much about a place none of

us have been. All I am saying is that perhaps we can place too much emphasis on heaven and the sweet by and by rather than on the world where we live. All I am saying is that if we are not careful, heaven can be a way of avoiding the world as it is, as we know it, as we experience it...avoiding this world where God is with us now...and where God is pleased to dwell.

So much of what I see masquerading as Christian faith is nothing more than an effort to deny the world as it is – to escape it; to deny the pain and hurt and suffering and sin in our life; to avoid the experiences of our lives that bump into our narrow ways of seeing the world and the expansiveness of God's love and then the refusal to name the fear and threat that comes with such experiences. In this way, the Christian faith becomes as good as any drug I know: numbing us to the world instead of taking us more deeply into it. "Jesus, take me out of the world. Give me heaven" becomes the cry. And when it does, it is sign of avoidance and denial; it is symptom of a sick religion, not Christian faith.

Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?

I am sure you have heard it said that "One can be too heavenly minded that they are no earthy good."

In his post-resurrection state, Jesus takes his disciples to the mount called Olivet, just outside of Jerusalem, and speaks to them for the last time. Then he disappears inside a cloud for good. One minute he's there, the next minute he's gone, his familiar shape vanishing into the fog like the end of a dream too good to be true. As a child, this was the kind of stuff that made my mind go crazy with imagination! Having never seen a person ascend, I wondered what the whole scene must have looked like. But as an adult, this is the kind of stuff with which I have trouble. I must admit, it just seems too much like that scene from the Wizard of Oz where the hot-air balloon that is supposed to take Dorothy back to Kansas comes loose from its mooring, and with only the professor/magician/snake oil salesman aboard— begins to rise up without Dorothy aboard. She is left behind in tears, saying, "I'll never get home to Kansas now."

Unfortunately, many people in the church continue to insist that the only way to understand Jesus' ascension is to believe that the physical body of Jesus actually floated up into the clouds, and that, quite literally, one could see the bottom of Jesus' feet. They insist that this story is all about Jesus going to heaven to be at God's right hand, with great emphasis on heaven, while we are left behind waiting for Jesus to come back for a second time (as if his first time wasn't good enough). For me, this kind of literalism is foolishness. It is also infuriating because it is a distraction, because I know that this story is so much more than that. It seems to me that this story is the ritualizing of a very painful and very poignant moment in the life of the early church. It is a way for the early church to say, "Jesus is gone...he's not here anymore...we will not know him as we once did...and so we will have to know him in a new way... and if we are ever going to see and experience Jesus again, we are going to have to see and experience him among us...in our life together...in our actions...in our words..in our love."

For many, the ascension of Jesus, as Barbara Brown Taylor notes,

is still too abstract an idea—an explanation that has very little to do with our day-to-day experience. Almost everything else that happened to Jesus makes sense in terms of my own life. He was born to a human mother; so was I. He ate and drank and slept at night; so do I. He loved people and got angry with people and forgave people; so do I. He wept; me too. He died; I will die too. He rose from the dead; I even know something about that. I have had some Easter mornings of our own—joy found in the midst of sorrow, life that bursts forth even in the midst of death. But ascending into heaven to be seated at the right hand of God? That is where Jesus and I part company. That is where he leaves me in the dust. My only experience of the ascension is from the ground, my neck cranked back as far as it will go, my mouth gaped wide open, my face shielded from the sun by the cloud that is bearing my Lord away...

"[People] of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" That is what the two men in white robes said to the disciples on the mount called Olivet just outside of Jerusalem. Luke calls them men in white robes, anyway, so as not to scare anyone, but you can bet your last nickel that they were angels – angels sent to remind God's friends that if they wanted to see him again, it was no use looking up. Better they should look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their ordinary lives, because that was where they were most likely to find him – not the way they used to know him, but the new way, not in his own body but in their bodies, the risen, the ascended Lord who was no longer anywhere on earth so that he could be everywhere instead.

No one standing around watching them that day could have guessed what an astounding thing happened when they all stopped looking into the sky and looked at each other instead. On the surface, it was not a great moment: eleven abandoned disciples with nothing to show for all their following. But in the days and years to come it would become very apparent what had happened to them. With nothing but a promise and a prayer, those eleven people consented to become the church and nothing was ever the same again, beginning with them. The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the converts became missionaries, the healed became healers. The disciples became apostles, witnesses of the risen Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit, and nothing was ever the same again. That probably was not the way they would have planned it. If they had had it their way, they would probably have tied Jesus up so that he could not have gotten away from them, so that they would have known where to find him and rely on him forever. Only that is not how it happened. He went away – he was *taken* away – and they stood looking up toward heaven. Then they stopped looking up toward heaven, looked at each other instead, and got on with the business of being the church.

And once they did that, surprising things began to happen. They began to say things that sounded like him, and they began to do things they had never seen anyone but him do before. They became the brave and capable and wise. Whenever two or three of the got together it was always as if there were someone else in the room with them who they could not see – the strong, abiding presence of the Absent One, as available to them as bread and wine, as familiar to them as each other's faces. It was almost as if he had not ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, flew far and wide, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Looking Up Toward Heaven" from [Gospel Medicine](#).)

Well, leave it to a country singer, Dolly Parton, to get the ascension right. The video of her song, *Jesus and Gravity*, ushered us into worship today. Maybe her words can help you connect with the ascension in a new way, or maybe even for the first time. I think she got the words just right.

*I've got somethin' lifting me up
Somethin' holding me down
Somethin' to give me wings and
Somethin' to keep my feet on the ground
I've got all I'm gonna need
I got Jesus
and gravity...*

And I find it to be so true: Jesus continues to lift me up. His vision of God's gracious and undying love; his call to love our neighbors just as we are loved by God, even for our enemies; his words of peace and forgiveness; his touch of care, healing and wholeness; his extravagant welcome and inclusive table; his insistence on human worth and dignity for everyone; his way of wisdom; his powerful experience of God in his human flesh and in the ordinariness of life is the stuff by which I rise each morning. And on my better days I rise with hope in my heart and possibility in my step.

Yes, Jesus lifts me up! But this I also know: when Jesus lifts me up, he doesn't call me out of this world. When Jesus lifts me up, he doesn't want me to obsess too much for heaven as a way to

ignore and avoid this place that I am in right now. When Jesus lifts me up, he knows my feet are planted solidly on the ground.

Why do stand looking up toward heaven for Jesus? Look around. Look around. Brothers and sisters, let get busy being an Easter people for this Good Friday world of ours. Amen.