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FMC May 21, 2023

Acts 1:6-14

Looking for Christ

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Those words, addressed to the disciples and Jesus’ followers who were with them, grab my attention when I look at today’s text. These people have followed Jesus all over Galilee and through Samaria to Jerusalem. They were present as Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry. They listened as Jesus taught about God and God’s kingdom, the realm where God rules and people live in the way God intends. They have experienced the deep fear and sorrow and trauma as Jesus was arrested and crucified, and they experienced the great mystery and joy of resurrection when the risen Christ returned to them. They know their own history. They remember the stories of David and Solomon and the prophets, and they dream of a time when they are free of Roman occupation and can experience the rule of God in their nation. Perhaps now is the time. Surely the resurrected Christ can lead them to victory and the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel. And they have it all wrong.

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” I wonder if they kept looking because they were expecting Jesus to reappear leading a horde of angels or angelic beings, a righteous “army” to defeat their Roman overlords. But they had it all wrong.

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” I think that question speaks to me because people today are still looking for Christ, for a Messiah appointed by heaven, anointed by God, who can lead back to some vision of what they believe this country or world should be. We see it in the media, in movies and shows like the Netflix series “Messiah” from a few years ago, during the covid pandemic. We see it in the number of books being published describing end times and various views on what that might be like. We see it in movements like QAnon, we see it in white nationalism, we see it in so-called “Christian” nationalism whose leaders push legislation and even endorse violence that takes away the rights of those who don’t fit, those who are different, whose beliefs are different, who look different or act different, who come from somewhere else, who don’t conform. They believe this nation is especially chosen to be privileged and ruled by God. But like the disciples, they, too, have it wrong.

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” I think we stand looking because we see so much brokenness. Covid brought trauma, world wide trauma. Most of us lost someone. And certainly, covid alone is not to blame. There are worries about climate change, culture change, the nuclear threat, population shifts. People struggle with rising inflation and losing ground economically. War and violence in one form or another seem to be a daily item in our news or experience. The political divide is huge. Relationships are broken. Even in the church we live in the time between Jesus’ life on earth and his promised return. We live in the paradox of Jesus’ physical absence and God’s presence with us which we don’t always feel, even though our faith says God is near.

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Instead of initiating a triumphant takeover of Jerusalem, Jesus told those early followers that the future, the times and periods set by God, are not for them, or for us, to know. Instead. the Holy Spirit, God’s Spirit, will empower them to be witnesses for Jesus not only in Jerusalem, not only in Samaria or Galilee, the territory that would have been part of David’s kingdom, but to the ends of the earth. As Luke tells the story, this is not a command. It is descriptive, a declaration in the future tense describing what Jesus’ followers will be doing. And then, after this declaration, to the amazement of those present, Jesus disappears from their sight, into the clouds…perhaps reminding some of them of the transfiguration, or of the stories of Exodus where God’s presence was hidden by a cloud.

Jesus did not ask his followers to set up a theocracy. When he taught, he told them to love their enemies and to do good to those who hate them. He told them to bless those who curse them, and to pray for those who abuse them. (Luke 6:27-28). He told them to be merciful, just as their Father in heaven is merciful (6:36). In Luke chapter 9 when Jesus sent out the disciples on a mission trip, he told them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. They were to accept the hospitality of those they met, and if it was not offered, they were to leave the town, shaking the dust off of their feet. Their task was not to compel belief or acceptance of what they preached. In Luke chapter 10 he did the same with seventy followers, sending them out in pairs to every town and place he intended to go. He told them that even if they were not accepted, God’s kingdom had come near to that place. Jesus predicted consequences for such rejection, but he did not ask the seventy to be the agents of retribution.

Jesus also warned his followers that there was a cost in becoming his disciple. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” (see Luke 14 verse 25 and following.) Jesus asked for a costly level of commitment.

So what was Jesus all about? if Jesus’ work was not restoring the kingdom of Israel, what was resurrection all about? What does it mean to be a witness for Jesus from where we are to the ends of the earth?

As the disciples stood looking toward heaven two men in white robes, we could call them angels, messengers from God, stood beside them and 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.” Perhaps that was when the disciples remembered what Jesus had told them during the days following resurrection. They were to stay in Jerusalem and wait. “This is what you have heard from me, “ Jesus said, “for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.“ So the disciples and those with them returned to Jerusalem, to the place where they were staying. They entered that room and devoted themselves to prayer. They waited. The Book of Acts is the continuation of the story begun in the Gospel of Luke. It tells how the story and message of Jesus, did indeed go from Jerusalem, to Samaria and Galilee and eventually all the way to Rome.

Jesus’ ascension was necessary. While he walked on earth he was limited to a specific place and a specific time. God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit, does not have those limitations. God’s Spirit can go where it wishes, across time and space, to any and every place. God’s Spirit knows no human boundaries.

Many years ago when the Mennonite Convention met in San Jose, immigration was a hot topic, as it still is today. Some of us marched on behalf of our brothers and sisters. We wore buttons, some were in English and some in Spanish. They said, “God’s love has no boundaries.” I love that saying. “God’s love has no boundaries.”

The work of Jesus, the work of God’s Spirit, is not to set up a chosen nation, or chosen nations. The work of Jesus, continued by his followers, his witnesses, is to establish a community centered on Christ, a community that embodies the love of God, caring for each other, and loving their neighbors. The work of Jesus, continued by his followers, his witnesses, is to do the work of the kingdom. Menno Simons put it this way, “True evangelical faith is of such a nature it cannot lie dormant, but spreads itself out in all kinds of righteousness and fruits of love; it dies to flesh and blood; it destroys all lusts and forbidden desires; it seeks, serves and fears God in its inmost soul; it clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute; it aids and consoles the sad; it does good to those who do it harm; it serves those that harm it; it prays for those who persecute it; it teaches, admonishes and judges us with the Word of the Lord; it seeks those who are lost; it binds up what is wounded; it heals the sick; it saves what is strong; it becomes all things to all people. The persecution, suffering and anguish that come to it for the sake of the Lord’s truth have become a glorious joy and comfort to it.” (end quote)

To be a witness to Jesus, to Jesus’ life and teaching, death and resurrection, is to look for what God continues to do, in our own lives, in our community, in the world. It is to share these stories, with each other, with those who listen. It is to be in community with others.

This community that God calls us to knows no boundaries. It challenges us, because we are not all the same. Some of us speak English. Some of us speak Spanish. In our church conference, Pacific Southwest, some of us speak French; some of us speak other languages. Some of us have European backgrounds. Some of us come from South or Central America. Some of us come from Africa. Some of us come from Asia. We eat verenika and tamales, rice and yams and plantains. We don’t agree about everything, but we bear with each other. We worship together in our annual gatherings. We love each other.

That is the kingdom that Christ calls us to. It is a kingdom that embraces differences. It is a kingdom that welcomes the outsiders, the people on the fringes. It is a kingdom that knows all of us are God’s children, created in God’s image. It is a kingdom that respects differences. This kingdom challenges us. Differences can be difficult. Sometimes we stumble, so we offer grace to each other. We offer and receive mercy. We forbear with each other and forgive each other. We pray together. We work at reconciliation. Together, we are witnesses to what God desires for the world, for creation, for all of us.

Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? The kingdom of God is here, among us, not fully realized, not finished, but present. We are the body of Christ, together, and our love for each other, our love for God and for our neighbors, that is what seasons and lights the world.