

May 4: Acts 1:6-11, John 17:1-11 "What Are You Looking For?"

I don't know if my experience is universal, but I expect most of the women in this sanctuary are about to smile knowingly. At my house, I am the designated finder of lost things. "Honey, I can't find my keys!" Ben will shout from the living room. And I can apparently see through things: "Did you look on your dresser?" "Yes. They're not there...oh, wait...yes, they are. They were under a handkerchief." I am omniscient, as far as Ben and misplaced items go. "Do you know where my wallet is?" is another favorite question. It's usually in the car. I'm not quite so good (yet) that I can walk in to a room, see him looking a little confused, and simply tell him where to find whatever he's missing, but it's only been eight and a half years. I'm sure as we grow older, my skills will only improve.

The key to my success is not that I have some super power. It's not that I can see through walls (or stray hankies) or that I can read Ben's mind to find out where he left his toys. It's a combination of 2 things: one, I know him very well and I know his habits, and two, when I'm looking for something, I really look. I look around where I think it might be. I move stuff: sofa cushions and pieces of junk mail. I look in unconventional places, because I figure if whatever I'm trying to find isn't in one of the usual

places, I must have put it somewhere else. The key to my success is that I look in many places. I don't just look for the keys and wallet by the front door or the glasses by the bedside table, I look all over. I look back and we trace our steps, I look up, I look down, I look all around (and especially under) until I found the lost thing (or I give up, which sometimes happens).

In the Acts reading for today, the disciples are in a holding pattern. Despite all the experiences of the previous several weeks, despite the crucifixion, the empty tomb, not one but two visits by a resurrected Jesus into a locked room, despite breakfast by the Sea of Galilee and supper on the road to Emmaus...despite all this, they are still not moving. Jesus has promised the Holy Spirit and given them their marching orders, "to be witnesses to the ends of the earth," and they still are not moving. They are lost...they need to get moving...but they don't know what they're looking for. And they are just about out of time.

If they were looking for Jesus to keep telling them what to do, to remind them of God's love and their call to teach others, to forgive sin, and to make more disciples, then this is their last shot. The story Luke is telling us in Acts today is the story of Jesus' last appearance on earth, the story of the Ascension, when Jesus returned to heaven, and left the disciples to figure it out on their own. This is a defining moment in Jesus' ministry, the

last earthly moment of his physical presence...and then he was gone.

There was nothing left to do (apparently) but to stand there, where Jesus left them, and stare up at the sky. Until, that is, some guys in white robes came by to ask: what are you looking up there for?

And isn't that just the story of our lives? We wait. We wait to be old enough to do what we want to do: drive. Get married. Get a real job, whatever that is. Start a family. We wait until the time is right to go on vacation, to buy a new home, to change careers. We wait to go on that mission trip, to start the new ministry, to do the thing we think God might maybe be calling us to do. We wait, and we wait. We look up to heaven, and we hope for a sign. And sometimes, when we're really having a good day, when we're really listening and feeling pretty confident, we stop looking for another sign, stop dragging our feet, and realize that instead of looking around, we should be looking ahead. Instead of looking up to heaven for a sign, we should be looking at all the ways God has spoken to us, moved us, motivated us in the past. And we should move forward.

Are you scared yet? I think the disciples were. After all they'd seen in the past weeks, after the Garden, and Golgotha, and the upper room, and the sea, I think when Jesus left, they felt they had been left behind. They wanted him to overturn the rule of Rome and reinstate Israel as the chosen

people of God. They wanted him to right all wrongs and to at last be the warrior King they believed would come even though, somewhere in their hearts they knew better. And his reply could hardly have been satisfying: “That’s not for you to know, but you know what to do.”

We do???

We do. Not perfectly, but at least in part, at least some of the time, and by the grace of God we have occasional flashes of brilliance and clarity. And in his great love for us, Jesus left us his prayer for the disciples from John 17:

‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have

received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Next week, we will celebrate the Pentecost, and an end to waiting, but for now here we are: Jesus’ disciples, waiting for a sign, a word, the nerve, the will, the strength to act. What are we looking for? Even better, where are we looking?

We do look up, to heaven, in our prayers and as we worship. And this is good, a right and righteous thing for us to do. We look to Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. We live in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the living breath of God in us. We look up, to remind ourselves that we are not alone, but that God is always with us. But looking up is not all we are called to do.

We also look back: we look back to our past, to the mistakes we learn from and the places where we now, in hindsight, find God alive and working in our lives. We look back to the stories of the people of God, and find

strength in their struggles and successes. We can look back and wallow in failure, but that is not our calling. Instead, as the people of God, we are to look on the past as the foundation for our faith: the faith of the patriarchs and matriarchs, of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Deborah and David, of Peter, Paul, and the Marys (sorry, couldn't resist), of John Wesley and Mother Theresa and Dorothy Day, of Sarah Williams and Tommy Piner, George Lewis and Anna Lou Haskins—you know the names in your life—and all those who write their own part of our faith story. We look to the past, and find our strength and find that there we can stand.

And then we look forward: to the vision of the Kingdom of God and Jesus' coming to bring it into our reality here on earth. We look forward to his coming again, and know that in the meantime, the between time, we have work to do. We look forward, and we hear God calling us: to love, to forgiveness, to grace and mercy, to justice and peace, to feeding the hungry and companionship to the lonely, healing to the sick and compassion to all who are in need of it—and aren't we all in need? We look forward, and the question comes again: what, Lord? And how?

Here's where the disciples got stuck, and it's an easy enough place for us to get stuck too. Here's where we could stay, and sit in our pews, and listen to sermons about kindness and mercy. Here's where we could

get comfortable, knowing that all those whom Christ has called us to love and serve are “out there” somewhere, not where we can get to them easily, and that missionaries and church programs will do that for us. We can plan, and program, and we could just sit here, looking up, looking back, looking forward, and perhaps wholly missing Jesus’ point, the point of his life, death, and resurrection. What are we looking for? We look up to God, and back to our roots, and forward to our faith...where else should we look?

We look around us. Look now to your right and your left, to the folks you greeted earlier in this service, and perhaps the ones you didn’t. Among the endless gifts of God in our lives are the love of God, the sacrifice of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the stories of our spiritual parents who have gone on before us, and time and a world yet to serve. As we look up, back, and forward, we sense God drawing us into relationship, friendship, even kinship with us...but it’s not just about me and God. It’s not just about you and God.

Like the disciples, as we look for answers to the question, “what now? And who? And how?” we can look around us for answers. On that day of Jesus’ Ascension, the world changed, and Christ’s human body passed away for a time, but his Incarnation lives on. When Jesus took on human form, was incarnated as one of us, it was a singular event...but the

Ascension isn't the end of the Incarnation. To use the vernacular, the Incarnation wasn't a one-off...instead it is a continuing act of life and love and hope and faith when we, his people, who are called by his name, look around us and see both the living presence of Jesus in the world, and work yet to be done.

Perhaps the question for the disciples, and for us, as we remember the Ascension, is not what are **we** looking for, but instead, what is God looking for in us? Our obedience? Certainly. Our faithfulness? Without doubt. Our love, kindness, and caring for others? To be sure. And I believe that God is looking for us to wait, when it is appropriate to wait, to watch and pray, but that God looks for us too to act, to look around and see the needs in our world and in our community and in our homes, and to finally act, with the love of God and the prayers of Jesus and the life of the Holy Spirit with us.

Now that Jesus' flesh is gone from us, I believe that we are to be God's love in the flesh. Barbara Brown Taylor says about the Ascension: "With nothing but a promise and a prayer, those eleven disciples consented to be the church, and nothing was ever the same again. The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the converts became missionaries, the healed became healers, and the disciples became

apostles, witnesses to the Risen Christ...and so, they stopped looking up toward heaven, and looked at each other instead. And then they got on with the business of being a church.”

This week, our United Methodist General Conference met to do the work of being a church, and made a change to our mission statement as it is contained in our *Book of Discipline*: our mission is now “to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” This is the point of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, God’s plan for God’s people: that the world might in the end be transformed, become the Kingdom of God here and now, a world and a time and a people who look not just back to the past, not just for a word from heaven that we cannot ignore, not just to a future when God’s life and love reign, but looking around us to find not only those whom we can reach out to in help, but also those who reach out to us.

What are you looking for? The answer is all around you.

What is God looking for? That answer is around us too.

What are you waiting for? Now, there’s a real question.

There is a very old legend, and all legends that persist speak truth, concerning the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to heaven after His Ascension.

It is said that the angel Gabriel met Him at the gates of the city.

‘Lord, this is a great salvation that Thou hast wrought,’ said the angel.

But the Lord Jesus only said, ‘Yes.’

‘What plans hast Thou made for carrying on the work? How are all men to know what Thou hast done?’ asked Gabriel.

‘I left Peter and James and John and Martha and Mary to tell their friends, and their friends to tell their friends, till all the world should know.’

‘But, Lord Jesus,’ said Gabriel, ‘suppose Peter is too busy with his nets, or Martha with her housework, or the friends they tell are too occupied, and forget to tell their friends – what then?’

The Lord Jesus did not answer at once; then He said in His quiet, wonderful voice: ‘I have not made any other plans. I am counting on them.’