

"LOOKING UP"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

In the days following World War II, a US Army officer and his wife were stationed in Japan. Japan had been devastated by the war. Its economy was in shambles and unemployment approached 60%. It seemed that every day people were coming to the door of this US Army couple seeking some kind of work. One day a man knocked on their door who told them that he could do wonders for their garden if the wife would only give him the chance. And so, for the first time in her life, this young army wife hired a gardener.

He spoke no English, but the wife through sign language and pencil and some paper gave him instructions about where to plant and prune and pamper her garden. He listened politely and followed her instructions carefully and before long her garden emerged as the finest and fairest in the neighborhood. When she finally realized that her new gardener knew far more about the matter than she, the wife stopped giving him directions and let him move on his own. It was magnificent....a magnificent garden.

But then one day the gardener came with an interpreter who expressed the appreciation but also the regrets of the gardener. Said the interpreter,

"He will no longer be able to care for your garden....he must leave and he thanks you!"

The wife expressed her regrets and through the interpreter thanked the gardener for making hers such a fine garden. Out of politeness, she asked the interpreter, "Where is he going? What is he going to do?" The interpreter replied that the gardener was returning to his old position as the Professor of Horticulture at the University of Tokyo. Can't you imagine the look that must have been on this Army wife's face when she discovered that her gardener was a university professor and that his field of academic pursuit was horticulture!

### DEVELOPMENT

According to today's scripture reading, the disciples of Jesus were gazing intently into the sky. Two men in white clothing stood beside them and they asked,

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?"

A good question. We ask and we wonder.....why were they standing there, gawking at the sky?

Earlier this week the Christian Church paused to observe and to celebrate the Ascension of Christ into heaven. Now the Ascension is probably the most difficult event in the life of Jesus for us to reconcile with a scientific world view. I've stayed away from it for many years. But the lectionary selection for today suggests that we take a look at it and say something about it. If Jesus ascended physically into the heavens, then where was He going? And does that mean that heaven is a physical place somewhere out there in space?

It's a problem to wrestle with and yet the disciples experienced something that they felt was pretty important; something they felt we should know about and so they placed it in the Biblical record. Therefore we must deal with it

seriously. It may not fit our cosmology but for them it was a true "mountain-top" experience....comparable to that which they experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration. It suggests some truths here for us to lift up and consider together. Once again, three thoughts to put before you.

IN AWE

Why were the disciples standing there...looking up into the sky?

First of all, the chances are that they were in awe at who Jesus was and what they had experienced in a very short period of time. We, too, I'm sure would have been "in awe".

I know if I had been one of the disciples and had seen Him do some of the things that He's reported to have done....or to hear Him say some of the things He said, I would have been walking around with my mouth wide open. As the disciples stood and watched and took it all in, they must have been asking themselves, "Hey....who IS this Man?" That would have been my reaction, and yours, too. We would have taken off our shoes and said, "We're standing on Holy Ground!" Some of us would have gone even further and perhaps would have fallen on our knees and cried out with Thomas, "My Lord and My God!" This is heavy stuff.

On a much grander scale, maybe it's like something that Sheri Hostetler experienced sometime back while camping out in Arizona, in a pine forest about 9100 feet up and far away from other human beings. She writes of this experience in a magazine called Arizona Highways,

"I couldn't sleep that night. Perhaps there was too much silence for ears dulled by the continuous hum of city life.....of tires skidding on pavement, refrigerators running, doors slamming, sirens blaring, voices shouting and low murmuring from the apartment next door.

I decided to go for a walk. Unzipping the tent door, I stumbled into a land I had never before seen....our fire circle, the log we sat on to eat, even the car were totally indistinguishable in the darkness that blends everything into the same shade of deep blue. Tall darkened forms - were they trees?...surrounded me. I was sure that I was being watched....by whom? And then I looked up and saw a sky overtaken by stars...."

She describes to the reader this sense of awe and of mystery she felt as she knew she was there in the very presence of God. She continues,

"I have never lost the feeling I had while standing there on that mountaintop....that feeling of being seen by a force much more powerful than I....."

I've had similar moments in my life. Many of us have had them....mountain-top experiences with God. Granted, they were not in the same league with the Ascension, but they have left us standing there with our mouths open, looking up and gazing into the sky...nonetheless.

Several weeks ago Huston Smith said something on television in a wonderful interview with Bill Moyers on the religions of mankind:

"The greater the continent of knowledge, the longer the shore line of mystery....."

And how true....

"Men of Galilee" asked these two figures in white, "Why do you stand **looking** into the sky". They were probably awe stricken by who Jesus was and what they had seen.

OVERWHELMED BY WHAT CHRIST CALLED THEM TO DO

And to that, let's add this. They were probably

a bit overwhelmed by what Christ had called them to do for we find that the last thing that Jesus said to them, according to the Scriptures was this:

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be MY WITNESSES both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and even....even to the remotest part of the earth". (Acts 1: 8)

And these discouraged disciples probably asked themselves,

"What's He saying to us.....we will be WITNESSES to the remotest parts of the earth? Why I don't even want to go to Samaria...."

Remember these were men who had probably never traveled more than eighty miles from their homes and now they were being asked to be His witnesses in the remotest parts of the world. Come on now....their jaws probably dropped as they looked at each other and then began to look up to the heavens....quietly wondering and waiting....

Some of you will remember that General Douglas MacArthur also saw service in France in World War I as a brigade commander. He went forward and waited in the trenches with the battalion that was going to lead the way in a major attack. He called the battalion commander and said to him,

"Major....when the signal comes to go over the top, I want you to go first, before your men...." He then paused and about ten seconds later added..."If you do this, your battalion will follow. You will earn the Distinguished Service Cross and I will see that you get it".

He looked the Major over for some rather long moments and then said,

"I see, Major, that you are going to do it. You have the medal now." And so saying, MacArthur unpinned a Distinguished Service Cross from his own uniform and pinned it on the uniform of the Major.

You know what happened when the signal came to go over the top? You know as well as I do. The Major...proudly wearing a Distinguished Service Cross which he had not yet actually earned, charged out in front of his own troops. And, as General Douglas MacArthur had forecast, his troops followed behind him.

The disciples could not know what lay before them. All they knew was that their commander-in-chief had a lot of confidence in them. And so they responded in kind. But still, they must have been a bit apprehensive about witnessing for Christ in an alien, hostile environment....one that was a bit like our own.....indifferent, too.

Stuart and Jill Briscoe have written a book together....in which they tell the reader of their meeting, of their marriage and family and of their ministry together across some thirty years. Early on in their marriage, they looked for ways to witness to their faith in Christ to those around them, but Stuart very carefully overlooked a hangout for young men and women across the street from where they lived in England. This hangout was called the Cat's Whisker. Picture Stuart as something of a staid young banker in a very proper British bank and he just didn't feel comfortable mingling with the rather rough looking crowd in the Cat's Whisker.

Finally he got up his courage and walked into the Cat's Whisker one evening and found a tough-looking young man and his leather-and-chains girlfriend and he began to talk to them and he was pleasantly surprised to discover just how open they were to him.

Through a series of questions and a bit of give and take, Stuart helped them to see that every inanimate object around them was made for a purpose and this opened the door for him to tell them that they, too, had been created for a special purpose. He wove in God's love and God's plan for our salvation for all his children and after he finished, Stuart asked them if they felt anything...if they believed in what he was saying and the young man answered,

"No....and neither do you!" "What do you mean? Of course I believe it" was Stuart's somewhat shocked reply.

"No, you don't and I'll tell you how I know you don't. The story is so wonderful that if you really believed it you would have been down here long before tonight to tell us....." said the young man with a lifted voice, and with that the young man and his girlfriend walked off....leaving Stuart....poor Stuart in a state of shock.

If you have ever tried to talk with a stranger about your faith in Christ you may appreciate Stuart Briscoe's apprehension. It's intimidating...really... under the best of circumstances, but suppose you and I lived in the kind of brutal world the disciples lived in. Remember that Jesus warned them that He was sending them out like sheep among wolves. It's no wonder they stood there... staring up into the sky. What were they to do now and what was Christ expecting out of them and from them? How would the world receive them? They did not know. Not only was all of this "heavy stuff", but it was "scary business" to which Christ had called them.

"Men of Galilee" asked these two figures in white...."Why do you stand looking into the sky?" Probably, it was AWE. Or, perhaps, it was APPREHENSION. Or, maybe there was even something else....

AWARENESS OF CHRIST'S ABSENCE

Something like a sudden awareness of the absence of Christ, their leader. They had become accustomed to looking always to Him for guidance and direction, for support and strength, but now.....there were out there on their own and in all probability they were feeling pretty much alone.

I'm reminded of a story that's been told about a Gideon Lee, a merchant in this city back in the 18th Century. From what we know most of America at that time was nothing but a vast and dangerous, lonesome place for a traveling merchant which is what Gideon Lee was. Lee, who was just starting into business, took his merchandise down to Georgia, but his vessel was wrecked on Cap Fear. He barely saved himself with nothing more than the clothes on his back. Accompanied by a friend whose name was Smith, Gideon Lee had no other means of getting back to the North and to this city than on foot. The journey was tedious and dismal through the mountains of North Carolina....often without finding a house in a day's travel. Gideon Lee wrote in his journal:

"One day....we were trudging along, nothing to be seen but the pitch-pine forests before us and behind us and on both sides of us....shoes worn out....feet bleeding.... myself before and Smith following after...neither had exchanged a word for some time when Smith suddenly broke the silence with his nasal twang. 'Mr. Lee!' he said. 'Well, Smith....well what about it?' 'Mr. Lee...I wish I could hear thunder....hear it thunder!' 'Hear it thunder?' 'Why do you wish so?' Lee replied."

"Because they say that thunder is God's voice" Smith replied, 'and if I could only hear it thunder I should know I was on God's earth....but as it is now, I don't know where I am'".

Like the disciples of Jesus, Smith was feeling alone and bewildered...wondering if he was still on God's good earth.

CLOSING

And like Smith, the disciples stood there wishing they, too, could hear some thunder...some acknowledgement that they were not all alone. And you and I have been there, too, wishing for some sound, some sign of God's presence. But you know how this account, this event ends...before He leaves, Jesus makes a promise to them that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and it did, and they moved on to the greatness that Christ had promised them.

Perhaps there is some anxiety in your life...some apprehension, some uncertainty that Christ is with you as you try to serve Him outside these walls. Maybe you're listening for the sound of "thunder" in your life. Take this story of His ascension along with you...the story of the Christ who is high and lifted up, who promises us His Holy Spirit to guide us and uphold us...always. So, look up and remember that you are not alone.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence, O God, in these moments. Send us forth in the assurance that You are with us, and wrestle with us in those hidden corners of our lives where doubt and despair, anxiety and fear persist. Help us to look up and to see You, "high and lifted up". Amen