

Not Knowing Where to Look

A sermon on Acts 1: 1-11 & Luke 24: 44-53 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 May 2023

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I give most of my sermons titles, but they're not usually very important. They're little more than an aid to filing. But something funny happened with this one, because after I had come up with it, the title itself evoked another image for me, which at first seemed so unrelated that I thought of changing the title to avoid it, but which as I thought about it some more, seemed to be not so far off track after all. I titled the sermon "Not Knowing Where to Look", because in the ascension story that we heard from the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples are told off for standing there staring at the sky. They didn't know where to look.

But after I had written it on the top of my page, it distracted me with thoughts of other situations of not knowing where to look. Sometimes we speak of not knowing where to look if we are feeling guilty and exposed in company, but the one that really came to mind for me was the awkward feeling I sometimes get when suddenly confronted at close quarters with a spectacular décolletage. Which, for the non-French speakers among you, is a very low or plunging neckline on a woman's top.

Now most of the heterosexual men among you already know exactly what I mean by not knowing where to look, but for the rest of you, let me briefly explain this odd feeling. Even after the event, it is odd, because even in theory, we're not sure where to look. I mean, it is obviously rude to simply stare, open-mouthed, especially at close range, but then we also kind of wonder whether it is perhaps a bit rude to pretend to take no notice at all, because what is the purpose of display if nobody notices. It might be taken as a snub or an insult.

But in the heat of the moment, it is even weirder than that because we're desperately trying to remember where we'd normally be looking if she was all covered up in a turtle neck jumper, and we can't! Do I normally hold steady eye contact, or do my eyes wander around, or what? And we stand there so flummoxed that every possible eye line feels wrong and inappropriate and embarrassing.

And I think there might have been a little bit of that for the disciples after the ascension, or at least after they had been told off for staring. I can't keep looking up there, because that's wrong, but where do I look? Jesus went that way, and we sing about "turn your eyes upon Jesus" and all that, but I've just been rebuked by an angel for staring open mouthed into the sky, and now I've got no idea which way I'm supposed to be looking.

Now, I don't want to push the literal image of that too hard, because the important things about the Ascension of our Lord have nothing to do with which direction he went, or how. Luke is the only one of the four gospel writers to use this ascension image to describe the final departure of Jesus, and he does it twice, once at the end of his gospel and once at the beginning of Acts, and even he has variations in the logistical details. The details are not the point. I think that Walter Bruggemann is correct in his suggestion that "this *geographic* portrayal is an alternative rendering of what became, in the church, *two natures in one person*."

The authority of Jesus in his majesty moves readily between heavenly and earthly zones, with nothing outside his governance.”¹

I think that is certainly correct, but I don’t think that is all there is to this story, and it is not the direction I want to go with it tonight. I want to stick with the original and first intended meaning of my title – not knowing where to look – and explore what it is that we might be being called to look to in this in-between time – this time between Jesus being taken away on the clouds, and his promised returning on the clouds to bring all things to fulfilment.

You see, it is not only when the two angelic messengers tell the disciples off for staring up at the sky that the question of where we should be looking comes up in this story. It gives us several different ways of looking at the challenges of living as faithful followers of Jesus once he is no longer leaving easy-to-follow footprints in the Galilean sand. And if nothing else, then this Ascension story is most definitely addressing that particular turning point of the Jesus story. When Jesus takes his leave from centre stage, how are we supposed to faithfully continue to participate in the drama?

The first way of looking at it comes in the form of a question from the disciples: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus must have been tearing his hair out over this question. Maybe that’s even what lifted him right off the ground! Sure, it had long been expected that the Jewish Messiah would restore Israel to its place as the number one political, military and economic superpower, but Jesus has been pretty actively resisting that agenda for three years now, and has already been crucified rather than call down the armies of heaven, and yet, even among his closest followers, at every turn in the road the old hopes pop up again. “What about this? Is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

And I wonder whether we are really that different? Are we perhaps rather prone to making much the same mistake. We live in a time of unprecedented change, and most of us find the pace of change bewildering and disorienting. When we come to church, we are faced with enormous pressure for change too, and yet many of us come to church hoping that it will be at least one place in our lives where we can depend on there being some stability and some honouring of tradition and some reassuring continuity.

And yet things are not stable in the church, are they? Various controversies are threatening to tear us apart, and our numbers and our influence are in rapid decline. It is very easy, at every uncertain turning point, to stand with the disciples as they start hankering after the glory days of the past. Oh for the good old days when our Sunday schools were bursting at the seams. Oh for the good old days when the church’s views on moral and social questions were treated with respect. Oh for the good old days when our clergy were regarded as pillars of the community instead of as pedophilia suspects. Surely the way forward is to bring back the good old days. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the church to the way it was in its glory days?”

Suddenly two men in white robes stood among them and said, “Why do you stand staring back wistfully at the glory days? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. "Acts 1: 1-11." <http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2007-05/blogging-toward-sunday-0> (accessed June 1, 2011).

come to do a new thing among you. Do you not yet perceive it? You won't if your eyes are stuck on the past." Actually, the angelic messengers didn't need to say that in our original story, because Jesus's countdown hadn't quite got to lift-off yet, so he could say it himself. Or words to that effect.

Many of the Christians who put a lot of attention on expectations of the second coming also get caught up in this desire to be "in the know". "Lord, is this the time? Hey, since you're leaving us to get on with things on our own now, could you just let us in on a few more of the secret details? We'll need to be in the know if we are to be true to you now. Lord, is this the time?"

It is probably easier to associate the second-coming fanatics with the disciples' second wrong place to look: up at the sky. But again I wonder if it is not the case that many of us easily fall into not knowing where else to look. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus" and all that. Well if he's not here to be seen, and he went off into heaven, then isn't that where we should be looking? Isn't heaven now what it is all about and we need to keep our minds on heavenly things and all that. Well, yes, sort of, but...

Heaven as depicted in the Bible, is not usually "up there" but coming towards us. I'm not just referring to a different view of the geography here. The question is not one of the direction to heaven, but of our closeness to it. The Bible does not usually depict heaven as being way off anywhere terribly removed from us. Instead it is nearly always approaching us, drawing near to us, breaking into our world, or taking root and growing up, almost imperceptibly in our midst. So when Jesus "departs" to heaven, he is not in some remote other place, but in a place that is constantly drawing near to us.

This ascension story is not telling us how Jesus came to be so absent from us, but how he came to be everywhere present and everywhere approaching, instead of confined to one geo-spatial location at a time. The heaven that Jesus has entered is not far off beyond the remotest galaxy. Heaven is God's love and life breaking into our present reality, and Jesus is in the midst of that, constantly drawing near, constantly reaching out to us.

If we want to keep our eyes on Jesus, we need to be looking for him in the people and events all around us, not in some heaven beyond the sky. Bishop William Willimon tells of getting caught in a massive traffic jam caused by cars bumping into each other while the drivers tried to watch a man climb the outside wall of the Sears Tower in Chicago. Their eyes were on the sky and not the road and so everything came to a halt. And Willimon commented that some Christians are like those drivers: "They're trying with all their might to keep their eyes on Jesus, but don't notice the people around them. Sometimes people get hurt as a result."²

But you know, I don't think that it is only the too heavenly minded who stand there staring at the sky. I reckon that for many of us, there is always a desire to have someone else in charge who we can confidently trust to take responsibility for everything. And so when Jesus steps off the stage, we think that there is really nothing we can do except make sure nobody does anything too adventurous until "daddy" comes back and tells us what to do. The disciples were so used to Jesus taking care of everything, that they were overwhelmed by the fear of having to take things on themselves. Jesus calls us to grow up and take responsibility. I

² William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, 29 (April, May, June 2001): 42

sometimes wonder whether the reason the church invented the clergy wasn't so that most of us could avoid having to take much responsibility in the continuation of Jesus's ministry and mission now that he'd left us to it.

Be that as it may, I will acknowledge that there is an opposite danger too. I haven't quite worked out how to fit it into my schema of not knowing where to look. Perhaps it is looking too much to ourselves or something. But there is a danger in over-reacting to Jesus's passing the mantle on to us. It's a danger, often seen in teenagers as they begin to be given more freedom and more responsibility. Some will impulsively try to grab responsibility for everything and refuse to listen to anyone for guidance. It is our job now, and we'll do it our way thank you very much. And we're off and running and ready to take on the world and set it aright in our way, and perhaps in our own image. Suddenly two men in white robes stood among us and said, "Why are you looking frantically around and trying to do everything right now. This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, clearly told you to wait until you have been clothed with power from on high." Jesus doesn't tell us to do our own thing, but to wait for guidance and power.

So where are we to look? In a way, I want to cop out of the question completely and just say "Jesus says wait" and step down from the pulpit now, but I think that would be a bit of a cop-out, so I will elaborate on it slightly. Because actually, Jesus doesn't just say wait. He says several other things too.

He doesn't rule out looking back, but it is not back to the glory days in the hope of somehow restoring them. It is back to the teachings of the law and the prophets and the apostles, that we might hear and understand the strange new ways of this messiah who forgives his enemies rather than restores a triumphant kingdom to crush them. He opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

And he doesn't rule out looking to heaven, but it is not up to some remote and distant spiritual realm, but to the signs of God's love and life breaking forth in the most unlikely places all around us. And we are called to celebrate them and nourish them and bear witness to them.

And he doesn't rule out looking forward to what comes next and what is to be done now, but it is not to a frantic activism that seeks to do it all in our own power, but to a prayerful discernment that asks what new thing God is doing and seeks to humbly cooperate with it and bear witness to it.

And in a few minutes, we will gather around the Lord's Table and we will be looking back to the crucified Christ and forward to the banqueting room of heaven and around us to the body of Christ in the gathered faces here, and if you still don't know where to look, then just look first to the bread and the wine which speaks to us of all of these things, past, present, future, up, down and all around. And prayerfully wait and you will be clothed with power from on high to be Christ's witnesses from the banks of the Birrarung to the ends of the earth. Amen.