



May 4, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Acts 1:1-11

“Standing Around, looking at the Sky”

We’re going to mix things up a little today. Instead of proclaiming our faith at the END of the sermon, we’re going to do that at the beginning of the sermon. So, if you are able, please stand and join me in the Apostles Creed, printed in your bulletin. (Recite creed.)

The basics are all here:

God came into this world in the flesh, in baby Jesus whose birth we remember at Christmas.

Jesus taught and healed and loved through 3 years of ministry

Jesus Christ died.

Jesus Christ was raised from death and appeared to many of his followers.

Jesus Christ went up into heaven.

Jesus Christ will come again.

Today’s passage from the book of Acts focuses on those last two points.

We are familiar with most of the other parts of the Jesus story—his birth, his death, his resurrection. But what do we do with this part? What on earth really happened that long-ago day? What’s that stuff about clouds hiding him from his disciples’

sight as he was “lifted up”? Lifted up where? I heard a story once, about an early astronaut’s experience in outer space. I believe he was from the USSR, and he scoffed at Christian beliefs about heaven, saying he had gone WAY, WAY up into the sky and there was no God out there. He said, “I don’t see how anyone can believe there’s a God.” The reply he received was something like this: “I don’t see how anyone can look at THIS world, to say nothing of the universe and NOT believe there must be a God.”

So—ok, we’re fairly sophisticated, many of us believe the mystery of Christ’s ascension is beyond our sight—as is the heaven and realm where he reigns with the Creator God and Holy Spirit. We know space travel is not likely to get us to heaven. All that is hidden from US, just as Jesus was hidden by a cloud from the first believers.

They may have been less sophisticated than us, and we may even chuckle at the mental image of them standing around, looking at the sky, waiting for Jesus to reappear. The men dressed in white (Biblical language that suggests angelic messengers), had to tell them to snap out of it, and move on. They promised Christ would come back again, but not just yet.

Though we may find their simplicity humorous, friends, the message they got that day two thousand years ago, is still an appropriate message for US. Because, though we aren’t standing around looking at the sky in a literal way, we do it in other more subtle ways.

Christians are sometimes tempted to turn their eyes from this world in disgust, looking off to a dreamed-of paradise where all the messiness of life will be cleaned up. This can take a number of noxious forms. We enjoy “ain’t it awful” conversations, where church folks look askance at others, both inside and outside the church. We cluck and shake our heads about those who are bad, wrong, misguided. We drift from thinking “we’re good, and decent people”, into looking down on other people, and isolating ourselves to live with others JUST LIKE US, as we await Christ’s return.

The right words to describe this “looking at the sky” thinking might be “condescension” and “gossip”. Another manifestation of this problem is highlighted by the disciples’ question addressed to Jesus just before his ascension: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They, too, wanted the messiness of this pain-wracked world to be dealt with. But they, as we often do, wanted a miraculous, instantaneous resolution, accomplished by others more powerful than we are. We stand around “looking at the sky” focusing on

worlds and powers beyond our own. We just stand there and stand there and stand there. And the world continues to suffer.

Christians are sometimes tempted to “look at the sky” by focusing on the past, the way things used to be. We get to thinking the way to heaven is via specific rituals, ceremonies, and styles of music and worship that have come to us through generations before us. Rituals, music, worship styles that have been passed along through the years are wonderful in themselves. They are gifts of God that help us to open up to God’s presence. So, also, are new rituals, ceremonies, music and worship styles. I think of groups like the United Methodist Women and UMM. Many groups are still accomplishing wonders through and for Jesus Christ. But things are changing. The shape of those ministries is evolving. We need to turn our eyes away from the past, away from “gazing at the sky” waiting for Jesus to solve all our problems. If we just stand there and stand there and stand there, a whole world of people hungering for the good news message will not hear it. It will not be “spoken” in words they understand.

Christians are sometimes tempted to “look at the sky” by focusing on the Bible. I know that sounds strange, but hear me out. The worst offenders are the “I can quote the Bible better than you can” folks. Fortunately I don’t run into those as often as I used to. Reciting chapter and verse from Scripture is not evidence of a life surrendered to Christ and his love. GOD, made known in Jesus Christ, is the one we worship- not human abilities to learn and remember Scripture. I don’t want to discourage anyone from studying and learning Bible texts. It’s impossible to be a faithful follower of Christ without learning about him through our sacred writings. But we need to understand that SPOUTING words from the Bible is not the key to discipleship, LIVING them IS. (I may be especially sensitive to this because I am NOT good at remembering chapter and verse references. I can tell you about stories, words, phrases that touch my heart, challenge and inspire me. But I may need a concordance to find the exact place in Scripture where they can be found.) Don’t just look in the Bible for Jesus Christ. Don’t stand there and stand there and stand there. Turn TO THE WORLD to share what you’ve found there. The world aches to receive its good news.

Christians are sometimes tempted to think following Jesus is primarily a spiritual matter- something that draws us OUT of this world. We look and look at the sky, longing to be renewed and blessed by Christ’s love. But if we just stand there and stand there and stand there we will miss it.

We need to do what those first disciples did.

First, pay attention to messengers from God. Pay attention when you are told “stop looking at the sky!” God has many messengers who speak through family, friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, co-workers, authors, doctors, counselors, music and movies, nature and much more.

When you’ve heard a messenger say, “Stop standing around looking at the sky” these are good things to do: Pray, and spend time in fellowship with others.

Pray for God’s direction. Pray alone, pray in groups, pray in church and during worship. Praying is NOT standing around looking at the sky. Prayer is turning to God present with us in THIS world. Prayer provides us with time spent conscious of God’s presence (which of course is with us even when we are not conscious of it.) Prayer opens doors to new possibilities. It also draws us into the realization of those possibilities. God puts the dream in our hearts and then begins to show us what part he intends US to play, so the dream may come true.

Fellowship with others. It’s my belief that true fellowship IS Prayer. Through it we meet Christ in each other Through it we spend time with God, made known in the word, hands, feet, tears, and laughter of each other. Fellowship occurs when we spend time together focused on LOVE, on CHERISHING each person as God cherishes him, as God cherishes her.

Friends, this reading from Acts teaches us that hanging around “looking at the sky” waiting for Christ’s return is not faithful living. Christ WILL come again, in ways and times that are far beyond our capacity to know or understand. And when Christ comes he wants to see us acting as servants of LOVE. That’s the game plan he laid out when he was first seen by his friends after the Resurrection. We are to take his message of God’s love for us into all the world. We are to LOVE him and all others just as he loves us. He will come looking for the servants of LOVE. We need to roll up our sleeves and work for love and justice, faithfully following Christ IN THIS WORLD, as we await his return.

Quit looking at the sky! Look your brother in the eye. See your sister and take her hand. Serve as a servant of love, for God IS love, now and forevermore, world of mystery yet world without end. Amen. Amen.

(Invite ALL to review sign up sheets available as they leave—Sign up to ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES and WORK FOR JESUS in THIS world!)