

Acts 1:1-11

1In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They 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."

In our passage this morning, Luke tells us the story of the ascension of Jesus. Luke is our only source for this story.

The original ending of Mark leaves us with an angel announcing the resurrection from within an empty tomb. He tells the women to tell Peter and the disciples that Jesus has left ahead of them for Galilee, where they are to meet up with him. The women, amazed and frightened tell no one. The End. It's a strange ending no doubt. No wonder a number of folks decided to add to such a stark ending.

Matthew continues his Gospel into Galilee, where the disciples and the Risen Jesus meet on a mountain. Matthew writes that there they worshiped him, though some continued to doubt. Jesus issues the great commandment: **Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.**" The end. Period. No story of ascension or exaltation. Why didn't Matthew include an ascension story? Perhaps he understood Jesus to have already received exaltation, and so the encounter he records here is between the disciples and an ascended and transfigured Jesus.

In Luke's gospel the setting is not Galilee, but Jerusalem. In his gospel, Luke presents both resurrection and ascension as occurring within one day. The risen Jesus makes several appearances that day, then leads the disciples out to Bethany, which is about 5 miles outside of Jerusalem. There, Luke tells us that he blessed them and was carried up into heaven. Then they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem, and to the temple of all places, where they were continually blessing God.

John, the last of the gospels to be written down, includes both a Galilean setting and a Jerusalem setting, but strangely never makes an explicit reference to the ascension of Jesus.

The author of the Gospel of Luke is also the author of Acts. IN the book of Acts we receive the fullest and most complete account of the Ascension. Luke tells us that, in fact, there was a 40 day period in which the risen Christ made numerous appearances to the disciples. But Luke again makes no reference to Galilee and in fact states that Jesus ordered them not to leave Jerusalem.

Luke tells us that when they were all gathered together, Jesus tells them **that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit has comes upon them**, and then he says: **and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.** Luke then tells us the story of the ascension a second time:

⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They 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.”

Throughout the Scriptures, clouds have represented something of the holiness, mystery, and “otherliness” of God. When Moses communions with God on the Holy Mountain, the mountain is wrapped in a thick cloud. When Jesus is transfigured before the disciples, again the mountain is covered in a thick cloud.

It is a little humorous to me that while the disciples are standing in slack-jawed awe, starrng with wonder at the cloud that just carried Jesus away only moments before—there are two angels quick to admonish the disciples, albeit very gently, to stop gazing upwards at the clouds. “Why are y’all just standing around looking upward?” they ask. One gets the impression that it’s time to stop gazing at the clouds and get to work.

The disciples have a whole lotta work ahead of them, and they’re not going to get anything done if their just standing around gazing upwards all day long.

I’m convinced that this gentle admonishment is just as pertinent today was it was nearly some 2000 years ago. Christians of all stripes, of all kinds and categories, have a tendency to stand around and stare at the clouds.

Now the clouds we stare at are beautiful—the mystery of Holy Trinity, the mystery of the birth of Jesus, the mystery the atonement and the deity of Christ. These are the great mysteries of our faith. And the word “mystery” is there to signify the cloudy nature of these great doctrines of faith. Good Christian folk can stare sincerely into these cloudy mysteries and come away with distinct and different understandings of the shape of things.

After all, the Bible itself, which never gives us a systematic theology, is pretty cloudy—I mean mysterious. Good Christian disciples of honest character and good repute can read the simple and clear words of Scripture and can come to profoundly different conclusions of essential and basic matters.

All in all, there’s nothing wrong with this, nothing wrong with gazing into the mysteries of God and meditating on the shape of divine things. Nothing wrong with it at all—until we become convinced that the way we imagine the shape of things is perfect, and everybody else is wrong.

Then, we stop listening what others have to say. Theological discussion is reduced to polemic. And we stop advancing the gospel because we're too busy defending the way we see the shape of divine things.

Cloud gazing is far from a harmless activity. Just look at Harold Camping. Too much cloud gazing got the best of him, and the consequences were far from benign. Harold Camping became convinced that Jesus was going to return May 21, 2011 and successfully convinced tens of thousands that his shape of things was correct. People quit their jobs; some gave away their life savings; some families were no doubt destroyed, as people gave everything they had to help Harold Camping get the word out. Then May 21, 2011 came and went. Harold told the press that he was flabbergasted. But, far from learning his lesson, he simply recalibrated things by six months. His cloud gazing has had devastating consequences for some families. One clearly disturbed mother tried to kill her daughters to spare them from the great tribulation to come. Thankfully, she was not successful.

But, cloud gazing is not merely the stuff of fundamentalists and kooks. Mainline folks are good at cloud gazing, too. And I love to gaze at the clouds. I have to admit. I have to confess: I love theological abstractions. In seminary, you acquire a degree in cloud gazing. You learn to find virtually any shape to suit your fancy in the clouds. And you also learn hubris. You think your shapes are right and everybody else has got it wrong. After all, you have the academic credentials to be a professional cloud gazer!

Albert Schweitzer, in his great work, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, realized that whenever a person endeavored to conduct a historical reconstruction of Jesus, the Jesus they ended up with looked an awful lot like the person doing the reconstruction. It was always a Jesus that promoted the values that we value, that preached the sermons that we like to preach, that believed the shape of things to be the way we see the shape of things. Schweitzer went on to paint a Jesus that was quite different than himself. Then, he left theology and biblical criticism behind to become a medical missionary, and paradoxically, went on to see himself as obeying Christ's call that we become fishers of men.

Now that we are in the third quest for the historical Jesus, Schweitzer's criticism is no less true—it is uncanny how we find ourselves in the shape of things.

I'm convinced that only way we can avoid the cloud gazing and get to the business of being the Body of Christ on earth is to learn to listen to one another, to be in dialog with those who are different than ourselves, to have humility—not hubris—and to keep our eyes forward, not forever gazing upward.

We've got to look into each other's eyes, into our common humanity, and learn to listen. The shape that others see may in fact help correct the errors in our own vision. Theological liberals

need conservatives, and conservatives need liberals. We need to listen to one another, and to accept each other.

In the 1920's the Presbyterian Church was being torn asunder by liberal and fundamentalist factions. Harry Emerson Fosdick, a potent and popular liberal preacher, delivered a watershed sermon entitled "Shall the Fundamentalists Win" at First Presbyterian Church in New York in which he argued, not that fundamentalists were bad or wrong and that liberals were right and good, but that the church should be big enough and bold enough to include within its boundaries both liberals and conservatives.

The sermon did not go over well. He was essentially forced to resign for face disciplinary action by the denomination. But, don't feel too sorry for him. John D. Rockefeller built him a new church right by the Hudson River—a Baptist church no less. Isn't that ironic?

Not all that much has changed in the Presbyterian Church since those days. We continually spilt over liberal and conservative lines. In our recent history, the church split in 1973 with the creation of the Presbyterian Church in America. IN the 1980's the Evangelical Presbyterian Church formed, and since then a steady, or not so steady, stream of churches have been leaving for the EPC, including a number of churches in our area.

Primarily, we like to fight over ordination standards—and we do quite a bit of cloud gazing in this area, both liberals and conservatives. We assume that we are right and our interlocutors are wrong. We assume that our shape of things is the right shape of things. We spend little time listening to one another and copious amounts of time in internecine conflict.

Generally speaking, conservative churches are the ones that generally break away, which ironically only adds to the liberal drift of the demonization. In our latest round, the progressive wing of the denomination scored a major victory by removing the ordination standards the conservatives won back in 1997.

Some no doubt, hale the victory was a victory for justice and equality. Others, no doubt, mourn the loss as a loss of biblical standards and integrity. Some churches will leave. How many, I don't know. Some will remain, at least for a while, and perhaps try to reimagine the way we exist together under this great umbrella of 2 million American Presbyterians.

I hope we can figure out a way to live together. Existing in a small, sheltered denomination of like-minded persons may sound like heaven—whether it be a progressive heaven or a conservative heaven. But, I fear we will lose something great if we split once again.

We need each other, I believe. We need dialog. We need to listen to the OTHER ways people see the shape of divine things. WE don't need the fighting, the name-calling, the hurt feelings;

we don't need the hubris, whether it is a liberal hubris or a conservative hubris. But we do need to listen to the voices of other folks, voices which may stand as correctives to our own.

But, more than all this, we need to stop cloud gazing so much. Maybe if we spend less time debating polity or fighting over biblical interpretation, and spend more time talking with people and getting to know people—we could find a way to love each other despite our differences. That's not an indictment of the conservatives, by the way. I know most of us here today are on the progressive wind of the divide. We need to be listening NOW to what our conservative sisters and brothers have to say.

So women and men of Fondren, let's not stand idle, slack jawed staring up blindly at the clouds—so sure that our shape of things is the true shape of things—let us look at one another with open hearts and open hands. Let us listen to voices that are different from our own. Let us listen with love, not judgment or fear or anger.

I believe that if we listen, we will hear God doing new things—I believe in this great denomination, and I believe that we can exist together. I believe that the PCUSA is still viable, despite all its many problems, and my prayer is that we can remain together, perhaps in a new way, but together. And I believe that we must put all this rancor and partisanship behind us, so that we can be about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, which unites us.

Amen