

The Power to be Christ's Witnesses

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Acts 1: 6-14

Joseph and Maria were deeply in love. But, Joseph was losing Maria. Mary Gordon's novel tells their story. It seems that Joseph was losing Maria to another love. Not to another man, but to another love. Maria was being drawn ever more deeply to the life of the nuns that she saw at the convent near her home. "You never saw the faces of the women who made those sounds, only the light that came through stained glass windows. Joseph saw Maria rise up on the breaths of the faceless nuns, rise up and leave him, leave the body that ran and lay on the grass. The body she loved that always did what she told it, that could dance and climb, or run behind him and put cool hands over his eyes and say, "Guess who?" as if it could be anybody else. But in the chapel she rose up and wanted to leave the body life that she had loved, leave him and all their life together."

Maria wasn't the first or the last who would long for that kind of mystical, spiritual, ecstatic experience. The Greek philosophers longed for that experience. They wanted to live life in the realm of pure spirit. And, lots of religions promise just that, saying, in effect, that life with God can only really be experienced free from the weight of the matter of this world, free from the pull of gravity. Well, today's reading from Acts, at first glance, might appear to be about just such things. It speaks of Jesus being lifted up to heaven and seemingly disappearing in a cloud. That's what the disciples are focused on.

The problem, of course, is that the story also makes it painfully clear that the disciples aren't yet seeing what they need to see! They are still missing the point. They'd been together with him for three years, experienced his crucifixion and resurrection, and now for some forty days had had resurrection appearances and experiences with him. Still, the first thing they ask him here is, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" They still don't get it! They're still waiting for either a military or supernatural Messiah who will, in one fell swoop, make the world what they want it to be. And, they're still focused on knowing the signs of the times, knowing *when* God will make happen what they think God has promised to make happen.

It's a selfish desire, of course, one that comes from wanting to make sure that I, or more generously perhaps and "us and ours" end up on the right side of things. Funny thing is Jesus, the one we would follow, never was that focused on himself, or making sure things ended up right for him. That early Christian hymn that Paul quotes in Philippians says it so succinctly, doesn't it? It says that even "though he was in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself..." and humbled himself even to the point of death on a cross." And it continues to say, "therefore (*therefore!*) God ... highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name."

But, it's a hard thing for us to get. It's so plainly there before us in scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ, but we still misunderstand who God is, and how God would have us live. And yet, you and I much of the time are fairly caught up in trying to make our lives come out the way we want. We use both our material wealth to do that, and often whatever spiritual means we feel might be available to us. Maybe it's like Maria longing for the mystical, spiritual experience she perceives that the nuns have, or maybe it's just joining a church. But, our struggles to find this kind of spiritual fulfillment go on beyond all of those things we do, don't they?

And I think, according to this story in Acts, they continue on, because it's God that we struggle with! We want to make God be who we want God to be but God refuses to be remade by us. This story teaches us to ask a different question.

That's the thing, without being fully formed by the story of Jesus; we don't ask the right questions. See, says this story, the question is not "how do I find my heaven?" however you define that. The right question, according to this story is: How do we *stop* looking up to heaven and become *witnesses* for Jesus Christ? The point is, when we do that, then that *is* heaven because that is life with *God*, because that's who and where God really is! You remember?

The disciples are concerned with times of when certain things are going to happen, things that they think will finally make the world right. But the resurrected Lord says to them, "that's not for you to know, or concern yourself with, but what will happen is that when the Holy Spirit comes within you, you'll receive the power to be my witnesses!" Apparently, that's what God is doing in the church, creating witnesses for Jesus Christ, witnesses to Christ's way of love and acceptance and peace. You remember, the Spirit leads Jesus in certain directions and not in others. Early on in Luke's gospel, Jesus preaching his first sermon declared that. He said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. (The Spirit) has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..." Would we expect the Spirit to go in a different direction than that when it empowers us to be witnesses?

Friends, that's what God is doing, here in this place. That's what God is doing through all our yearnings for spiritual, or ecstatic or mystical experience. Certainly, monks and nuns learn that. They may be originally drawn to and deeply loving and longing for prayer life and pure spiritual experience, but they end up making cheese, or teaching in schools, or just generally struggling with how to live together in a community! And soon enough they make the connection that that's what the spiritual life really is. And all the prayers and mystical experience and singing serve that end. They point us back to this life we live in God's world, with and for each other.

Could it be more pointed than two angels saying to the disciples right after they've had this ecstatic, mystical experience, "Why do you stand there looking up toward heaven?" Christ is forever caught up in this world...giving us the power to be his witnesses. And you know what? It's the only real power we have. Everything else is illusion or idolatry or both. We live in an era and in a nation that is deluded by the notion that everything is up to us. But to join a church is to stand up and heckle that notion. It's to say loudly we are only co-creators of history, either our own or the world's, because finally we are dependent on God. We are dependent on a power beyond ourselves, and it's the power that makes us able to live for and after the manner of Jesus.

Is that why you're here? Because if it's not, believe me your struggle, however it manifests itself, whether wanting worship to be this way or that way, or wanting the church to offer this or that, your struggle will continue because your struggle is with God. A friend of mine tells the story of going to visit a new couple that had been attending worship with their family and had expressed some interest in possibly joining the church. He was excited about it, until during his visit with them he felt it start turning into an interview. Soon enough the couple asked what First United Methodist was planning to do for their children. Well, the visit came to grinding halt and an uneasy silence when the minister asked them what they were planning to do for First United Methodist. They stopped coming shortly thereafter.

What God's doing in the church is giving the power to become Christ's witnesses. And friends, that's a power much more miraculous than Jesus' levitating into the clouds. It's the power an alcoholic finds to stop drinking. When you ask him how he did it, the first thing he'll tell you is that he didn't. It's the power to share love and help across language and cultural barriers for special needs children in the Ukraine. It's the power of a child learning to read through the help

and relationship established in Wednesday Walkers. It's the power that bunch of youth and adults find together at Project Crossroads to do all sorts of things they had no clue about.

It's the power we find at this table together to take his life given for others as our life, the life that sustains us and heals us and the life we live together for others. Will you come? God would make you a witness for Jesus Christ.

Amen.