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Acts 1:6-11

When It's Hard to See Jesus

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Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus gathered his disciples on the Mount of Olives. You will recall that it was from the Mount of Olives that Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. When he did that, the disciples thought he was going to establish the new kingdom that he had been describing. But they were surprised by the crucifixion — and even more surprised by Easter. According to Luke, after the resurrection Jesus spent the next forty days talking about his kingdom. It was a kingdom ruled by God, and thus a kingdom of justice and peace.

So it is not surprising that, as soon as the disciples realized that they were back on the Mount of Olives, their first question was, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom of Israel?” We get that. We could echo their question: “Lord, is this the time when you will fix broken bodies, broken dreams, broken hearts, and countries broken apart by violence and greed? We have been waiting for so long.” This weekend, we could ask “Lord, is this the time when you’ll establish a kingdom in which there will be no more Memorial Days because there will be no more war?”

Jesus told the disciples, “It is not for you to know when things will be made right. But you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Then he just disappeared. He ascended out of their sight back up to heaven. We are told that the disciples were so stunned they just stared up into the blank, blue sky. They must have looked like puppies who stare up at the door when the master leaves — you know how they cock their heads when they get confused and think, “Well, surely he’s coming back. You don’t think he meant to leave us in charge of this place, do you?” Of course, that is when the trouble begins.

Suddenly two angels appeared next to the disciples. These angels say, “Hey. Hey! Why are you staring into heaven? He said he will come back. He will. He will return.” For 2000 years the followers of Jesus Christ have been waiting for his return to earth when he will fully establish his kingdom of peace and justice. Now I am fully aware that 2000 years seems like a long time. But God’s vision of time is different from ours.

When I was at the Chicago Field Museum, I noticed a time line they had exhibited up on the wall. It was 85 feet long, and it represented the five billion years of earth’s history. Do you know how much space the human race takes up on that 85 foot time line? Half an inch.

Now, I don’t know what God was doing for the other 84 feet, 11½ inches. The dinosaurs alone took up 100 million years. What was that all about? And the ice age? Why did we need that? How does that play into God’s plan of salvation? Beats me. But as I stared at that time line, it

became very clear to me that God is not in a hurry. So when we start talking about the 2,000 years we've been waiting for Christ to return, well, from the perspective of heaven, it isn't really all that long. It has only taken up a couple of millimeters. And when you talk about how long you have been waiting for God to answer your prayers, or how long you have waited for a broken heart to be healed, or how long the world has waited for the broken nations to be restored in the Middle East — as God sees, it's not that long.

Yes, that is good theology, but it doesn't provide a reason to find hope in our very short lives. This is what does offer hope: the things that we are waiting for God to do are important. But no less important are the things that he is doing in our lives while we wait.

Waiting doesn't have to deplete us. We can choose to become stronger through it. Waiting creates the room for faith to develop. If Jesus had immediately established his kingdom, there would be no reason for us to have faith. We would have simply seen with our own eyes this new world. But waiting allows us to see with our hearts, to envision, by faith. And faith is what changes our lives.

Since we have faith in a Savior who is coming, we don't have to pretend to be the savior. That means we have too much joy to live with anxiety and cynicism. We have too much humility to act like gods. And we have too much gratitude for the blessings we have to waste our fleeting years searching for more. Gratitude, humility, and joy. That is how we change our ends of the world. And it was the faith in the coming Savior that gave us these powerful gifts. But it was the waiting that gave us the faith.

Remember, however, not only did Jesus tell us we have the power to wait. He also told us that we would receive the power of the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Now I have to tell you this is possibly the most frightening text in the Bible to me. When Jesus was born, I was delighted because God was with us. When he conducted his ministry, I was taught and challenged to be a follower. When he died on the cross, I was overcome with God's love for us. And when he rose from the dead, I was surprised with the hope of eternal life. But when Jesus ascended into heaven, like the first disciples, I am terrified to discover he called us to bring his kingdom to every corner of the earth. The angels don't tell the disciples just to sit tight while they wait for Jesus. No, they remind us that we have a job to do in the meantime.

You have a job to do! This is what Paul meant when he said, "Creation waits with eager longing for what the children of God will reveal" (Romans 8:19). It is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples they would do even greater works than he did (John 14:12).

Now let's get this straight: the Savior of the world has left, and all creation is eagerly longing for you and me to do greater works than Jesus.

Think for a minute about the week you just completed. It was probably jammed packed with children whose diapers needed changing, and others you ferried to the orthodontist, soccer, and piano lessons. Then you hauled the SUV home to make dinner, and then paid some bills, read a story to the kids, broke up a fight, and then devoted yourself to the mountain of laundry that

mysteriously just keeps multiplying as if it's the only miracle you ever see. Or maybe it was filled with meetings at the office where you talked forever about things that get nothing accomplished, struggled through computers that crash when you need them the most, copy machines that keep jamming, e-mail that proliferates at the speed of light, and a desk littered with those little pink slips of paper that say, "PLEASE CALL!" To tell you the truth, it doesn't really sound like a greater work than Jesus did, now does it?

So on Sunday, we come back to worship where we take our place in the pews next to the other disciples. We gaze up into the heavens thinking "Surely, Jesus has something better than us in mind. He just has to get down here and straighten this out." But what we hear instead are the words of the angels who remind us that we have the power.

Remember, though, the power you have is just to be a witness. A witness doesn't make something happen. Witnesses merely speak about what they see. This means that it is not your responsibility to bring Jesus' kingdom to the world, your office, family, or even your own life. That is the job of the Savior. Our responsibility is see Christ by faith, and to love him so much, to long so deeply for his appearance, that any glimpse we get of him we recognize. This is our mission even if he comes wrapped in another's life. Especially then.

According to Matthew, near the end of Jesus' ministry his parables all take on the common theme of his departure. In one of these parables an absentee landlord puts his servants in charge. In another, a bridegroom arrives later than expected. In still another, a master distributes talents to his servants and then departs on a long trip. But Jesus' last story is the most powerful:

"When the Son of Man does return," he said, "he will separate the sheep from the goats." To the sheep on his right side, he will say, "Come you who are blessed and inherit the kingdom prepared for you.... When I was hungry, you gave me food. When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was stranger, you welcomed me. When I was naked, you gave me clothing. When I was sick, you took care of me. When I was in prison, you visited me." And the righteous will say, "Lord, when did we do all of that to you?" He will respond by saying, "When you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me." And the goats who on his left will say, "Lord, if only we had known it was you who were hungry, sick, and in prison, we would have taken care of you." But the Lord will respond, "It was me. And because you couldn't see that, you'll never enter the kingdom."

If you are looking for Jesus, don't stare up into heaven. You have the power to witness, to see him among us. In the words of Mother Theresa, "Anyone who has meditated upon Jesus, must then go out and look for him in disguise."

Benediction: Jesus is not gone. He is here among us. And the joyful people are the ones who use faith to see him, even in disguise. Amen.