

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Burt L. Burleson

“Left Behind”

Acts 1: 1-11

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'Tis the season at DaySpring. I'll have a lump in my throat for a few months, because almost every week we'll be saying goodbye to someone we've grown to love. Students mostly, going off somewhere where life is taking them and where God is needing them.

We're used to it, but still it hurts to say goodbye. But it's a good hurt, huh? Better to be somewhere and hurt to leave than leave and shrug... Live so it hurts to say goodbye and so there are good words that must be said. ... Words of blessing.

Luke tells us at the end of his gospel that Jesus was right in the middle of such a goodbye. He was blessing them... which we know from experience made it better. (Don't ever leave anything, anyone in your life unblessed.)

Jesus didn't... Jesus was blessing them and then he left and left them behind... and Acts says left them staring into the sky... squinting to catch some last look.

You know how that is... parents on the porch waving and watching as the newly weds head down the street with a U-Haul in tow. They stay on the porch trying to catch the last look.

You know about the need to see one last time... leaving the hospital room of a friend and looking back for one last glimpse.

You know, don't you? Looking in the college student's bedroom... trying to catch a glimpse, though they're gone. Looking through the photo album at the loved one you want to remember. Holding something of theirs.

That's the disciples on Ascension Day. He'd told them this day was coming... that he was leaving and here it is and there he goes... And they're staring, straining because there's a cloud in the way. ... Darn cloud.

This is the last scene in the gospel story... this story of God with us. That's one way to say it in a nutshell... The Gospel is the Story of the presence of God with us. The Life of God with us.

The Creator... the Source of it all, in swaddling.

In grade school skipping rocks... laughing and learning and laughing.
God... having best friends and losing them.

The divine reality wrestling with questions about the universe
and about his own heart
and his own destiny.

God descends into flesh... He mingles himself in humanity (Clement). It was the great coming together of divine and human... and spiritual and material... and infinite and finite... and it came together in Jesus.

And it came together as the Church came to say **“without confusion or changing”** and **“without division or separation.”** The incarnation is not primarily a covert divine rescue operation... it is the fulfillment of all God ever wanted. It is **“The arrival of God among us, so that we might go to God, or more precisely, return to Him,”** as Saint Gregory said.

That’s why Ascension Day is so important. Why Jesus leaves them all behind and left them gawking at a cloud just outside of Jerusalem. The Gospel Story isn’t just that God is with us but that we are... now... with God.

Jesus ascends into the Eternal. Easter is not simply an act of spiritual CPR... as one of my friends says, Jesus isn’t resuscitated... so that he can walk about and have a few more years in the first century. Jesus is resurrected... a new being... a new creation. (R. Wood)

And Jesus lifts all of us up with him... into the reality of God.

God descended in order that we might ascend. It’s all larger than we suspect or imagine. It’s more than it seems. (K. Wood)

I love the last verse of Christ the Lord has Risen Today. We always sing it on Easter but I can never get any sound to come out of my mouth... It’s too True.

Soar we now where Christ has led.

Following our exalted head.

Made like him, like him we rise.

Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

So... in the gospel story, God is with us and in the gospel story we are with God... lifted up with Christ into the reality of God and Jesus’ prayer is answered... **“May they be in us, God... just like I am in You and You are in me... I in them and you in me... complete unity”... one big family.**

We’ve been adopted up into that great Trinitarian family... we have been... it’s done, papers signed... sons and daughters with all the rights and privileges thereof... sometimes **“soaring where Christ has led”**... at least on some days.

Now that’s what we’re singing about and celebrating today... That’s what’s true... Already true. Mysterious and beyond understanding... but it’s what we confess happened in the Gospel Story... Humanity is lifted up. **“If I be lifted up I will draw all humanity unto me.”**

That is sort of... “up there” though, isn’t it? ... or “out there” and cosmic, huh. Like Jesus, it’s behind the cloud and hard to see. And so, cool and cosmic as it sounds, we still feel left behind... just like they did. **He’s up there and I’m not.**

And sometimes it's like if the Gospel Story was about the presence of God, then the story after that is about the absence of God. Or... at least it can sure seem that way. Now you see him, now you don't.

And even if we confess and believe and maybe understand some of all that great ascension theology... Monday morning rolls around... and your life rolls on and sometimes there are just too many clouds.

Clouds of your own limitation and your own stuff.

Clouds that we make...

And clouds that God seems to make and disappears behind.

So... we stare... at least some of us do. Lot's of folks have stopped looking. Maybe they never got much of a glimpse in the first place, never knew God with us, so He only seems beyond us and our staring at the clouds seems silly to them (a thought from Barbara Brown Taylor).

Still, as disciples we stare. And we need to remember what happened that day... on that first Ascension Sunday. An angel shows up... Luke says, "**men in white**" but we know good and well these are messengers and the message is "**why are you looking up into the sky.**" Meaning, you're looking in the wrong place... the problem is the preposition "up." **Jesus isn't up in the sky**, the angels say.

He will come to you just like he was taken from you.

Unexpectedly, mysteriously...

Out from behind or through that dark cloud in your life... not in any way predictable or in any way you can control. Not in any way you can hold on to or cling to, though we'll all try. With our hands and ideas and our order and doctrines, we'll try.

It never works though, clinging on. Clinging is one quick way to lose track of the transcendent... better to worship. Luke says in his gospel, "**they just worshipped.**" Worship is the essential act, which says, "**I'm not in charge...**" and you aren't. Life's much more interesting than you'd make it.

Jesus will show up from the Eternal Mystery, even as he departed into it. There he'll be, in some "thin" sacred place or time... Where the "here and the there" aren't separate, at least not for a moment.

And the "us and them" aren't apart, which will be the case anytime the Living Christ shows up and we see Him.

And words will become Word.

Small acts of love, great windows to God.

A loaf... life.

And Alpha... Omega.

So, the angel tells them... tells us... to quit looking up. Instead start looking around and among... that's where the living reality of Jesus will be. Which makes

the Gospel Story not just God with us nor is it just us with God... It's God in us and between us and through us, the church, always and forever... All in all.

That's what the first disciples came to know. Jesus was in them and in the Church and that changed everything because they knew they really weren't left behind after all.

Barbara Brown Taylor always says it better than most. **“Whenever two or three of them got together it was always as if there were someone else in the room with them whom they could not see – the strong, abiding presence of the absent one, as available to them as bread and wine, as familiar to them as each others’ faces. It was almost as if he had not ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flowed everywhere, flew far and wide, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth.”** (Gospel Medicine, 78)

That's the Gospel... and what we remember today. And spiritually speaking... an act of remembrance is not recalling what was... it is being aware of what is. Celebrating what is.

And we celebrate the gospel, all of it.

God in Christ...

in us...

in the world.

All in all.

Amen.

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