

Why Do You Stand Looking Up?

Psalm 93, Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11

Have you ever seen something so amazing you stood in awe and had a hard time taking your eyes off of it? Perhaps you've been to the Grand Canyon in Arizona and marveled at the beauty of the Earth and how water can carve rock into something magnificent over a period of thousands of years. Perhaps you've been to Mt. Rushmore in South Dakota and have taken in how spectacular the sight of four great Americans carved into a mountain is. Perhaps you've flown into New York City and have seen the Statue of Liberty welcoming you home as she stands proudly before the New York skyline and bridges built by the ingenuity of Americans. The 11 apostles of Jesus stood in awe as they saw Him ascend to Heaven then were greeted by two angels dressed in dazzling white who told the apostles Jesus was now in Heaven and will be coming back the same way He just departed.

You may know the book of Acts is a sequel to the book of Luke, written by the same author who is likely Luke. It was common in antiquity to repeat the theme from the end of the first book at the beginning of the second book. The Christian movement after Jesus's resurrection is the post-Easter Church. This is the era we live in today. Luke starts the book of Acts with greetings to a specific person, Theophilus, who was likely the book was originally dedicated and would have helped to circulate the book and spread the gospel. While Theophilus was a real person, his name in Greek means

“lover of God”, and this name can certainly apply to all of us reading the book of Acts today. We are all lovers of God and lovers of His gospel.

Note that Luke tells us a length of time Jesus was with His followers after the resurrection. For more than a month fellowshiping with them. Notice in verse three Jesus is teaching about the Kingdom of God. During His ministry He continually taught and preached about the Kingdom of God and references the Kingdom of God many times over in the gospel. Jesus’s message and ministry do not end after the resurrection but continue. He also gives signs of proof He was really alive and not a ghost or an imposter. Remember the religious and government leaders were spreading lies to cover up the resurrection by saying Jesus’s body had been stolen from the tomb. Matthew’s book tells us this happened and this false story had been circulating to the days when the books of Matthew and Luke were written, which was a couple of decades after the resurrection. Luke tells in his first book, when Jesus first appears to His disciples they think they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus reassures them by offering them peace. He invites them to see and touch His crucifixion scars and His body to not doubt but to believe! Jesus wants to erase all possibilities of doubt of His resurrection, so we will know He is alive!

Luke describes Jesus eating with his disciples. The disciples are so dumbfounded and perhaps in shock of seeing Jesus they can’t believe their eyes. Jesus meets their needs. He eats with them, so they can overcome their doubts it actually is Him! In antiquity, people knew ghosts did not have flesh and bones, which is why Jesus invites His followers to touch His body and see His body closely. There are still doubts, so Jesus does something else a ghost can’t do, He eats with them. In antiquity, eating in

the presence of others was done when sharing a meal together. Remember the last night of Jesus's life before the crucifixion? He was eating a meal with His closest followers. Sharing a meal in antiquity was fellowship. Jesus is sharing fellowship with His closest friends, His disciples, the very people who abandoned Jesus.

Friends if you every feel like you've let Jesus down, remember His closest friends felt the same way after they had abandoned Jesus, but He came to them after the resurrection and spent time with them. Jesus was gracious to them; He forgave them. If you ever feel like you've done something that might be too big for forgiveness...or maybe you know someone who is discouraged about sin in their life, or they are beyond the forgiveness of God, you can be reassured by the gospel, AND you can reassure others of God's forgiveness. Jesus shows us that He is able, and He WILL grant forgiveness to those who sincerely ask for it and desire fellowship with our Lord.

In antiquity, the Jewish people were looking for their messiah to be their savior of the political and social world. The land promised to their forefathers, the patriarchal fathers, Abraham, Issac and Jacob, was occupied by the Roman empire. Before this, their land was conquered and plundered by the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. The disciples knew Jesus is the Messiah for God's chosen people and they are eager for the promised land, the land promised to them through generations to be restored as God's kingdom on earth. These were the expectations of the Jewish people for generations. Here was Jesus resurrected from death; they have seen Jesus perform many miracles and wonders and have proclaimed him as the Messiah.

Instead of fulfilling their expectations, Jesus reminds His friends the scriptures of the Old Testament must be fulfilled. As it turns out the kingdom will be restored but not in

the way, which was anticipated. In his first book, Luke tells us Jesus opened up the minds to understand the scriptures. Throughout Jesus's earthly ministry, His disciples are often confused about His teachings, His parable lessons and why He takes certain actions. Jesus often gives extra teachings to His disciples. Even though they are Jesus's closest friends, they are often confused and ask for extra teachings. But here, Jesus opens their minds to understand the Old Testament scriptures for themselves. They will not longer need Jesus to give them extra explanations, they will know for themselves, mainly how Jesus has fulfilled the prophesies and foretelling of His coming in the Old Testament. They now understand how Jesus Himself is in the scripture of the Old Testament; He is the one who is discussed in their ancient scriptures as God.

Jesus tells His closest followers and friend, they will soon receive power of the Holy Spirit. He says this twice, emphasizing the importance of the Holy Spirit who will come to them. In Acts chapter one verse five, He says, "you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Then again in the same chapter verse eight, He says, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." Jesus tells them someone else is coming from God to empower them, who will be their helper and their guide. The disciples would have made the correlation of the Holy Spirit with scriptures from the Old Testament. They also would have known the Holy Spirit would give them inspiration to speak for God. They would gain greater understanding, which Jesus has had to know how the scriptures have been fulfilled and how to preach to others.

In His last act of His earthly ministry, Jesus commissions His disciples making them Apostles of the post-Easter church. He passes on the mission of proclaiming the gospel from Himself to His closest friends and followers. He passes on the mission, a

succession from Himself to those He carefully trained, taught and spend His most intimate moments with. The disciples would have been familiar with the succession of a teacher to the teacher's disciples. Moses the greatest prophet for the Jewish people was succeeded by Joshua. Elijah another well known prophet was succeeded by Elisha. This model of succession is seen again as the apostles are commissioned by Jesus. They take on Jesus's mission of taking the gospel message to others. The apostles will be witnesses for Jesus who is our Christ starting in the heart of where God's presence has been, Jerusalem, where the temple of God housing the very presence of God has been. But Jerusalem is just the beginning. Chapter one verse eight of Acts tells us, the apostles will go out into Judea, which is the surrounding area of Jerusalem. Then to Samaria, to people who have been detested by the Jewish people because their ancestors married gentiles making their descendants, the Samaritans, a unclean people. Then the apostles will go even further beyond to people with no Jewish heritage at all, to gentiles, all different peoples of the world. The gospel is for everyone.

Then Jesus ascends to Heaven. He is taken up from their presence and before their eyes. And while the apostle are standing in awe and wonder, pondering taking the message of Christ to Samaritans and even gentiles, perhaps puzzled by Jesus's instruction and marveling at His words and the mission He's given them, they would have known the only other ascension in scripture was that of Elijah, I imagine them thinking this is all boggling their minds. This a greater sight and more to take in than beholding the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore or the Statue of Liberty welcoming you to New York City and America – the apostles need some to help them with what is next,

so God sends angels to offer them explanation. Jesus will come back the same way He has departed.

The angels needed to remind the apostles to not stand around looking up into the sky. The angels provided a reminder of Jesus's message to go out and spread the gospel. They reminded the apostles to be the post-Easter church for all peoples of the world. We carry on this mission of the original apostles today.

So friends, be lovers of God like Theophilus. Know that Christ is alive. Be reassured there is nothing beyond the forgiveness of God when you love Him. Be empowered by the Holy Spirit and knowledge of scripture to find ways to share the gospel, which is our Christ Jesus, with others around you each day until the second coming of our Lord. Amen.