

“The Old Look Up in the Sky Trick”

May 16, 2010

Matthew 28:16-20

Luke 24: 50-53

Acts 1:1-5, 8-14

**Sermon preached by
Pastor Rob Fulton
First United Presbyterian Church
Bellefontaine, Ohio**

(The sermon begins with the pastor standing in the chancel staring up at the ceiling...staring...staring...until others in the congregation begins to look up as well. Then, when others are also staring up into the sky trying to see what it is they are supposed to be see, the sermon begins.)

It's called, of course, the old "Look up in the Sky" trick and you've just fallen victim to it...or SOME of you anyway. Those of you who go back a few years may remember that the Smother's Brothers used to do it to perfection. Tommy would come out and start staring up into space. And pretty soon Dick would start looking too...staring...straining to see what it was that Tommy was looking at. And about that time, Tommy would get this big, mischievous grin on his face and proudly announce "Gottcha!" to his brother.

But then, the Smother's Brothers weren't the first to do the old "Look Up in the Sky" trick either. Maybe you've been the victim...or even the perpetrator...of such a trick yourself. One or two people will stand around looking up into the air...and slowly, but surely, a group of bystanders will start to gather around. And pretty soon, they too will start staring up in the sky...because, after all, people are just naturally CURIOUS. And when a whole crowd of people are standing there gazing up into the sky, trying to see whatever it is they're supposed to be seeing, the perpetrators will sneak off chuckling at how gullible people are to be staring up at the sky for nothing!

The old "Look Up in the Sky" trick, of course, has taken many forms over the years. Remember a few years ago when SOMEONE predicted that the world was going to end on such and such a date...that a solar eclipse and a realignment of the planets would bring about the end of the world. And all over the world, people were "looking up in the sky" so to speak, watching and waiting for something to happen. In California, people sold their homes and moved to the Rocky mountains for fear that the "BIG" earthquake would finally hit and suddenly drop their state into the Pacific ocean. In India, Hindu temples were mobbed by worshipers praying to Vishnu to stop the ensuing catastrophe. In France and Peru and Italy, people gathered together on mountaintops with friends and loved ones to "look up in the sky" as they awaited the end of the world.

And just last year, on Friday, November 13, to be exact, the movie *2012* debuted, telling the story of a Mayan prediction of the cataclysmic end of the world which is supposed to take place on December 21, 2012. And once again, people are busying "looking up in the sky" to try and see what everybody else supposedly sees.

Of course, Christians are among the best...or the worst, depending on your perspective...about falling victim to the old "look up in the sky" trick, aren't they? Prior to the Vampire books that are all the rage these days, do you remember what books were wildly popular? It was the *Left Behind* series where two Christians, self-proclaimed "prophecy scholar" Tim LaHaye and writer Jerry Jenkins, teamed up to write more than a dozen books, which sold more than 75 million copies and topped the best seller lists for a decade or more. Their books encouraged Christians, in effect, to "look up in the sky" and watch for the signs of the coming Apocalypse when Christ would return, duke it out with Satan, destroy evil once and for all, and bring about the Kingdom of God, thus resulting in end of the world as we currently know it.

Before the *Left Behind* books, of course, there was Hal Lindsay back in the 60's and 70's with his book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, once again encouraging good and faithful Christians to forsake the world and prepare themselves for the soon to be "End Times." After all, though 2,000 years ago Jesus had ascended into heaven from that hilltop outside of Jerusalem as his disciples watched, all the signs, Lindsay said, were pointing to fact that Christ would soon return to begin the final age when God would triumph over evil and bring an end to all creation in its present form...but NOT before all HELL breaks loose, Lindsay was quick to let us know! Therefore, Lindsay argued, we'd all better abandon our worldly ways...get right with the Lord...and await the coming end.

But then, the church itself...the LEGITIMATE church...BEYOND all the "end time" business some Christians get so caught up in...the church itself has been guilty of playing the old "look up in the sky" trick from time to time as well...now hasn't it? Sometimes, the church has stood around on street corners, so to speak, pointing up to the sky, diverting followers' attention from THIS world in order to focus on another world that is yet to come...namely heaven. People were told that we're only on this earth for a short time, so bravely bear the troubles that come your way because God's gonna reward you in the life to come. The message, of course, was to remain pure and unspoiled...untouched by the muck and mire of this life...so that you would be SPOTLESS enough to get into heaven when the great roll is called up yonder!

And the old "look up in the sky" trick can be played with Jesus TEACHINGS as well. If you separate SOME of what Jesus said from the REST of what he did and taught, you can make a pretty good case for the argument that what REALLY matters is somewhere else other than in this old world of ours... sometime later on...in the great by and by...and not so much in here and now. And if you choose your verses right, you can even prove your argument by saying "*Jesus himself SAID so!*" Let me show you what I mean.

"*You will always have the poor with you,*" Jesus said. Which sounds as if Jesus really didn't CARE about the poor and therefore WE don't have to care about the poor either. Which is a good way to avoid having to take responsibility for something we sometimes don't want to have to deal with...IF, that is, you're willing to have your attention diverted AWAY from everything ELSE Jesus said about giving and caring and sharing and loving your neighbor as much as yourself.

Or take, for instance, the old "look up in the sky" trick we play with some of the Apostle Paul's writings...all his talk about *salvation by faith alone* rather than trying to save ourselves by some kind of works righteousness...by trying to EARN our way into heaven by doing enough good deeds or obeying "The Law" faithfully enough. Which is all fine and dandy, and no doubt true, because it is, after all, the inspired Word of God which comes to us directly from God through thru God's servant Paul.

But then, you see, we begin to play GAMES with that notion of *salvation by faith alone*. We twist it and turn it and end up with a kind of theology that says that ALL you have to do is to BELIEVE and HAVE FAITH because that's all that God requires of you...or so we THINK.

Why do I need to go to church? I've got faith. I believe in God. That's all that's important! Jesus even SAID so, now didn't he?!

Give money to the church? Why SHOULD I? I believe in God! I've got faith. What else matters?

Help take care of the poor? Hurmf! Let the poor take care of themselves! If they'd get off their lazy rear ends and go to work maybe they wouldn't NEED my help! The only thing that's important for MY salvation is that I believe! I've got faith in God! What else matters?

Come to Sunday School? What for? Sunday School's for kids! I learned along time ago that I'm saved by my FAITH...not by coming to Sunday School and reading a bunch of Scripture!

Tell others the Good News of God's love? Why do I need to do THAT, for heaven's sake? Everybody's got a Bible. All they have to do is pick it up and read John 3:16... "for God so loved the world!" and then BELIEVE it...like I do. That's what really counts, isn't it. That you just BELIEVE!

Now today, of course, is ASCENSION SUNDAY...that Sunday we celebrate the fact that Jesus "*ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty*" as the Apostle's Creed so eloquently puts it. But let's be HONEST about it. Ascension Sunday is simply NOT one of the BIGGIES of the church year. Think about it! How many churches have you ever known that have an annual "Ascension Festival"...or talk about "celebrating the Ascension"...or take folks out to a hill top to worship as they stare up

into the sky into which Jesus ascended? I mean, really! The Ascension just doesn't make the TOP 10 list of all time favorite worship services in most churches.

Of course now, that may be due to the fact that the Ascension occurs 40 days AFTER Easter...and 40 days AFTER Easter always comes on a THURSDAY. And you know as well as I do that it's none too easy to get folks to come to church on Thursday. Sunday's hard enough! But THURSDAY is well nigh unto IMPOSSIBLE!

But even when we transfer the celebration of the Ascension over to Sunday, as we're doing today, there is still precious little celebrating of the day Jesus "*ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*" Perhaps it's simply something we take for granted. Perhaps it's one of those mumbo-jumbo, high-fallutin' "theological ideas" that's just too complicated to understand. Or maybe in our day of Hubble Telescopes and space shuttles and satellites with cameras exploring the outermost reaches of the universe, talk of Jesus "ascending into heaven" seems to be the outdated, archaic stuff of pre-modern myth and legend.

Well, whatever the reason, I think it's fairly safe to say that Ascension is simply NOT one of the major celebrations of the Christian church! Which is really too bad. Because not only does the Ascension assure us...in the language of metaphor...that Jesus is in heaven...with God...RIGHT BESIDE God in the position of highest honor and favor...whispering in God's ear on our behalf – the Ascension ALSO has a very clear message for our RIGHT NOW lives as Christ followers...ESPECIALLY when the old "look up in the sky" trick is diverting our attention AWAY from who Jesus is calling us to be and what he's calling us to do.

You see, we Christians today are not the first to fall victim to the old "look up in the sky" trick. Oh no! The DISCIPLES played that game a LONG TIME before we did.

Picture the scene with me if you will. The Risen Christ and his disciples are on the Mount of Olives...one of Jesus' favorite spots during those last days of his life. He's been crucified, raised from the dead, and has spent another 40 days among his followers opening their eyes and helping them understand who he is, what has happened and who THEY are called to be as his followers. And then, after giving his disciples their final instructions...that GREAT COMMISSION, we call it...the commission to BE his witnesses and spread the Good News of the Gospel...a cloud – symbol of all that is mysterious and glorious and beyond human understanding – surrounds Jesus and he is suddenly gone...VANISHED...taken up into heaven!

Well, the disciples are, to be sure, dumbfounded...which is, no doubt, understandable. I mean, it's not every day that you see someone "taken up into heaven" in a cloud...even if it IS Jesus. But then, instead of getting on with what Jesus had commanded them to do when he was gone...which was to tell others about him...to spread the Good News of the Gospel...they just STAND there...and STAND there...and STAND there – staring off into space. In other words, they get diverted. They fall victim to the old "look up in the sky" trick INSTEAD of getting on with the job at hand.

Now, we're not told how LONG the disciples stand there looking up into the sky, but it must have been for quite a while. Because pretty soon, two men dressed in white – which is a sure-fire indication that they were messengers from God – appear before them and startle them out of their trance:

Hey Dudes! What are you men of Galilee DOING? Why in the WORLD are you just STANDING there looking up at the sky? Jesus went away and one day he'll come back.

And while that's ALL the Bible records those two messengers from God saying, I can almost HEAR what came next:

Jesus has gone away and one day he'll come back. In the mean time, Jesus has given you a JOB to do! So quit gawking and get to working! It's time to get on with DOING what Jesus wants you to do!

Which is EXACTLY what those messengers might say to US each and every time they find US looking up in the sky, our attention diverted from the task at hand, instead of DOING what Jesus has asked us to do!

You see, for all the ways our attention gets pulled away to all kinds of OTHER things in the church...IMPORTANT things, some of them...but TRIVIAL matters, others...Jesus would say: "*But REMEMBER what I have asked you to do!*" For all the ways we find to "look up in the sky" to avoid doing the job at hand, those messengers from God would remind us: "*But REMEMBER what Jesus told you to do.*" For all of the "busy-ness" that so often consumes our lives...including right here in the church...for all the committee meetings we think we've got to attend...all the planning sessions we think are so important...all the

places we've got to go...things we've got to do...the commitments we're supposed to keep – for all the STUFF that consumes our time and attention and energy and keeps us from focusing on what we SHOULD be doing as Jesus faithful followers, the Word of God says: “*But REMEMBER what Jesus has called you to do.*”

And what IS it that Jesus has called us to do? Simply this: To spread the Good News of the Gospel in ALL that we do...to people both near and far...letting them know through both our WORDS...and our DEEDS...of God's love for us all through Christ Jesus our Lord. THAT is the job at hand! And THAT is the job that Jesus wants us to get on with doing...no matter WHAT else we may do in life.

Go into ALL the world and preach my gospel to everybody, Jesus said.

Be WITNESSES for me.

Tell others ABOUT me.

Let them KNOW of my love.

SHOW them in real, tangible, life-giving ways what the Son of God is all about.

Be people of grace and mercy and kindness and love.

DON'T get caught up in the old 'look up in the sky' trick.

Instead, remember WHO you are and WHOSE you are.

And then, GET ON with the job at hand!”

Now, I can't say for sure, of course, but it seems to me that that is a message that is JUST as valid for US TODAY as it was for those first disciples two thousand years ago. For though we aren't standing on the Mount of Olives just outside of Jerusalem watching Jesus ascend into heaven, our calling on this Ascension Sunday 2010 is still the same – DON'T fall victim to the old “look up in the sky trick”...what EVER it is that diverts our attention from the job at hand. Instead, get on with DOING what Jesus asks...no, COMMANDS us...to do -- if, that is, we're going to BE his followers:

*Be my witnesses...*Jesus says.

*Spread my Gospel...*Jesus ask.

*Share my love in ALL that you do...*Jesus commands

ALL of which is accompanied by a gracious and loving promise to which we can cling forever and a day:

And remember! Jesus says...

REMEMBER! I am WITH you, ALWAYS...always and forever...even to the end of time!

Amen...and AMEN!

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