

Sermon Archive 152

Sunday 28 May 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Acts 1: 6-14

John 17: 1-11

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I'm still not sure who they are, but they're back again - the two men in dazzling white robes. Last time we saw them was Easter morning - when they were talking to the women at the tomb - explaining where Jesus was **not**. "What are you doing here?" they'd asked. "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" This isn't where to find him.

There's a darkened cave where we put all our dead things - things that no longer work, or no longer live. Things that might fill our memories but have no future. Things that slowly, through natural processes of decay will become dangerous to us, or at least unpleasant. Don't look for him there. He is not there. That was Easter Day.

And now the dazzling men are back - with another "what are you doing here" advisory. To a group of disciples, staring up into the sky, they put a question: "why do you standing looking up towards heaven?" Definitely implied in the question is a statement: "you shouldn't be doing this; this is not where you need to be; there are other things for you to stare at, other places to explore, other things for you to do." That was the Ascension advisory.

There's an undefined ether-y zone, either on the edge of our world, or right beyond it, towards which we sometimes stare. There are clouds in it, changing shape, sometimes casting shadows, sometimes wetting the earth. Sometimes the sky is blue, sometimes dark. We can never go there. It's beyond our natural reach. From the time we were primitive, we had ideas about it being the home of our god. Not sure why; other people had lots of little gods living in trees, hiding in rivers, saying peek-a-boo

from holes in the earth (gods close at hand.) For us it was mountain tops and skies - God transcendent, removed. It's into this that our disciples stare - looking for the One who has loved them. It is to exactly this staring that the dazzling men say "what are you doing?" You shouldn't be here!

At each end of the forty day season, at Easter and Ascension, the dazzling men appear, telling us where *not* to look. The natural question forms easily; where *do* we look then? Longing to find made real the things that John's Jesus was talking about, as he prepared to say goodbye, but assured us that he wouldn't leave us orphaned, where do we look? Indeed, not to our collection of things that are dead! Nor to the skies where we cannot go! But where? Where now do we find the risen One?

Well, with the skies eliminated from the search, let's see where the disciples go next. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that they go no further than a Sabbath day's journey. It's a curious little detail - typical of Luke. By Jewish laws, you couldn't work on the Sabbath - including going on long or strenuous walks. To allow a modicum of practicality, short walks were allowed - the upper distance being roughly 1200 metres (less than a return walk from Knox Church to the Christchurch Casino). By modern routes, Olivet to the centre of Jerusalem is about 7 kilometres, less than that though to the edge of the city. Luke doesn't say whether the journey to Jerusalem was a split arrangement over two days, or whether they made it in one hit. But he *does* mention that these disciples, moved on by the dazzling messengers, didn't break the old wisdom. They kept with their conventional conscience. Yes, Jesus had broken Sabbath laws, and Paul would later spend ages thinking through whether the old laws still applied. But these disciples continue to draw on what they've been told, in their cradles, about pleasing and honouring God. Where do we find the Jesus who's loved us? Where do we look for the risen One? Not absolutely sure yet; but in the first part of their journey, the disciples don't allow themselves to rush. They work at a slowed pace they believe that God has hallowed. They take a respectful pace, willing to wait, never breaking the neck, moving in the gentle rhythm of God. At that kind of pace, are we more likely to find the risen One? Living more slowly, will we be shown where now he is? Busy people will resist considering that - but the disciples, as they move on post-Ascension, adopt a respectful

pace.

Their journey leads them to an upper room. We're told that it was the room where they were staying. We're not told it was the same upper room where they'd met forty days before, when they were still frightened. It probably **was** the same room, but Luke doesn't say so. So it might have been the room where they'd perceived the risen Jesus among them, or not. It might have been the room where first they'd heard the words "peace be with you", or not. It may have been a room that somehow had real connections with sacred events, or not. Maybe none of that is all that relevant. What Luke **does** tells us is that it's a space where all the people of Jesus are staying. It's a space with friends in it. It's a space of community. Among the others who have known Jesus, who've learned to perceive him with them, who greet one another by name ("I call my sheep by name, they know my voice"), the disciples come together. Could it be that we are more likely to find Jesus as we seek him among others who love him and know us? Not absolutely sure yet, but at this point of their journey, moved on by dazzling messengers, the disciples meet in the upper room.

This part of the story ends with Luke's simple observation that these people were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. Again, we're not told that this was confined to the upper room. In his gospel, Luke actually talks about them continually being in the temple. Again, it's not so much the place - it's the activity, and the company within which it occurs. The community is praising God, praying, doing it as one. What did Jesus say? "Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world. Holy God, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." Praying - being open to God, open in the private spaces and public places - offering our thoughts to God, considering our life before God, listening for the familiar voice, together. Moved on from our propensity to stare into graves and skies, the people of Jesus take up the practice of prayer. Is this where to find the risen One? Not absolutely sure yet, but it's part of what they do.

There have been a few little details at the start of the story we haven't yet explored. They're the last conversation that Jesus has with his

people. The people are expressing either curiosity or anxiety. I can't tell which. But clearly they've been thinking about the condition of their country. They're an occupied country - run by Romans, people for whom they have neither love nor respect. They want to know how long it's going to be before they can seize back from this oppression something that feels like true self and life and pride. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" For them, it's not an "end times" question; it's an "end of oppression" one.

Once he's answered the question, Jesus is going to disappear - and the dazzling messengers will arrive to move the crowd along. His answer goes like this: "It's not for you to know these things. This is not something about which you should concern yourself. But the time is coming when the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you will be my witnesses."

Then he's gone, and the search for him begins. Not to the grave we look. Not to the skies. But to something called "waiting for the Spirit". Waiting, searching, remembering the name that has been made known - until the Spirit comes, and this ending is turned, echoing Easter, into a new beginning. Perhaps that's what the dazzling messengers mean when they move the disciples along. Don't stay here where last you saw him! It's not about endings. Go forth to where you may find him in a new beginning, where we'll find the restoration of that which we lost: true self, life, dignity, meaningful calling.

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I'm *still* not sure who they are, but they're back again - the two men in dazzling robes. Last time we saw them they were moving on a group of sky-gazing disciples. Now, here they are again, this time addressing us. Take a gentler Sabbath pace; slow down to the rhythm of God. Move with the others who have known Christ. Pray; consider life within the concern of God, listen for the familiar voice. And seek the Spirit - who is coming.

I'm still not sure who they are, but they're back. Not to the grave. Not to the skies. But waiting for the Spirit . . . A moment of quiet.

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