

“WHO DO YOU LOOK UP TO?”

Acts 1:6-11 – Ascension Sunday

**Dr. Andrew Wolfe, Trinity United Methodist Church
Homewood, AL – May 4, 2008**

I read somewhere that a big part of training guide dogs is to get them to look up. They are great at looking around, waiting at crosswalks is no problem, leading blind people around fences and potholes is easy – But they get so focused on the world around them that they never look up for low hanging branches and the like. They are so focused on what’s right around them that they don’t feel a need to look up.

Pastor Tonya Arnesen says that when she was a child she loved to help her mother. And one of the things she liked to do was to play waitress. When her dad would come home from a long day at work, she would go to him and he would ask her to bring him a cup of tea. She would get the tea from her mother, who always warned her, “Be careful, not to spill, Tonya, or you’ll burn yourself.” But that wasn’t easy for a six year old to do. She would take little steps, keeping her eyes glued to the tea cup, and every time she saw the tea begin to splash up the side, she would stop until it stopped, and then start again. Two steps at a time.

Her mother knew what the problem was. She had once been a waitress and knew the secret. “Tonya, when you carry a cup full of hot liquid, don’t watch the cup, watch where you are going. Look up!” And she discovered her mom was right. When she looked at the cup, she invariably spilt the tea. But when she looked up and ahead, she remained steady.

Today is the day set aside in the church calendar to remember the story of the Ascension. And we find the disciples quiet literally looking up! After his resurrection, the book of Acts tells us Jesus appeared to his disciples over a period of 40 days. During this time he encourages them with the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. He instructs them that they are to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, and then it comes time for him to leave them to it. Luke said, he led them out as far as Bethany, a village outside of Jerusalem, and while he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was lifted up into heaven. All the while, Acts records, the disciples stood there looking up at him.

This is a far cry from where we left the disciples on Good Friday, and even on Easter. On Good Friday, they had turned their eyes away from Jesus. They were downcast, dejected. And even on Easter, the gospel says they didn’t recognize him when he appeared. But here, at last, they finally seemed to have gotten it – gotten Jesus. They finally saw Jesus for who he was. They are no longer fearful, downcast. Luke says that they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they set out to do what he asked them to do – to be his witnesses.

From looking down, they look up. And that change of vision changes their direction in life. It makes a difference who we look up to, doesn’t it?

I watched an interview with a new NBA player who was still pinching himself for having made it. He recounted walking into the dressing room for the first time, and there was the player who had been his hero – the one he had looked up to since he was a boy. He had wanted to be just

like him, and that was his motivation to work hard to achieve. This young player knew that he was who he was in large part because of who he looked up to.

Who do we look up to? The answer to that question will shape our lives. For one thing, it will determine who we look down on.

We in Alabama are used to being near the bottom of the list for lots of things. We have had lots of states we have had to look up to because they were ahead of us in things like education. But we always comforted ourselves because if we were 49th, Mississippi was 50th, so we could look down on them.

I saw a picture this week of a group of Neo-Nazis gathered for a dinner in celebration of Hitler's birthday! Imagine that, celebrating the birthday of a man responsible for some of the great evils in human history. Why? Well, I suppose, if you look up to Hitler it allows you to look down on all sorts of people – Jews, and immigrants, and anybody else you don't like.

Who we look up to can determine how we look at the world and others. Except with Jesus we don't get the option of looking down on anyone. One day, Jesus was eating in the house of some Pharisees when a woman came in and bathed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. She evidently had a reputation. The Pharisees were shocked. "If you knew what sort of woman this is, you would not allow this." They were inviting Jesus to put her in her place, to look down his nose at her. But Jesus refuses.

When they brought children to Jesus, the disciples tried to stop them. They thought Jesus didn't have time for them. He was too busy and children were too un-important! But the Gospels say that Jesus rebuked his disciples and said, "Let the children come to me." He did not look down on them.

One of the charges leveled against Jesus is that he ate with sinners and tax-collectors – the kind of people you look down upon. But instead of looking down on them, he looked at them and saw their need, saw their potential, saw them as children of God.

The movie *Crash* won the Academy Award in 2005 as the best picture. It tells the interlocking stories of whites, blacks, Latinos, Koreans, Iranians, cops and criminals, rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless. All, who in one way or another, look down on others. Again and again people's assumptions prevent them from seeing the actual people in front of them. An Iranian is thought to be an Arab. A Latino, who is a hard-working family man, is seen as a gang member and crook. These people "crash" into each other like pin balls – never taking time to look up and look into the eyes of the other. And the results are tragic.

Pastor Jim Taylor says that it seems characteristic of the human race that no one ever looks up. We watch where we put our feet, not our heads. In politics, we are much more likely to examine our politicians' clay feet than to explore their ideas. City people avoid intentional eye contact with anyone on the street. If you look into someone's eyes, you acknowledge a relationship. You might have to take some responsibility for that other person. Urban life is only possible by looking down and ignoring those who throng around us. No wonder, he says, we have trouble theologically with Jesus' ascension into heaven because it forces us to look up.

It makes a difference who we look up to, because if we look up to Jesus, it will change our

perspective, our outlook, our attitudes.

Notice in Acts, it says that as the disciples stood there, two men in white robes stood by them, and said, “Why are you standing here looking into heaven?” There is a note of rebuke in the question - You have seen it now. Now you understand, so get on with it. Become one with doing what he asked you to do: “Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth.” Their gaze is redirected. From looking up at Jesus, to looking around at the world and engaging the world in the name of Jesus.

Get bearing from Jesus, and then, go to work.