

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11**  
***What Do We Mean by the Trinity? Jesus***  
**May 24, 2009**

In the church of my childhood, we recited every Sunday, and I mean *every* Sunday, the Apostles Creed. Before I could read the Bible for myself, I knew the basic tenets of the Trinity:

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:*

*Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried;*

*He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Ghost...*

I may not have known the finer points of theology, but I was reminded that this Jesus was taken up and is no longer “with” us, and has been replaced by the “Holy Ghost.” Well, I will share next week more thoughts about the Holy Ghost, but for today, let’s look for Jesus.

The question before us is, who is Jesus, now that he has been taken up? We can comprehend the earthly Jesus. Jesus, who walked along the Sea of Galilee, we understand. We can almost smell the water he changes to wine, or feel his calloused hand, when he reaches out to Peter as he walks on water, and feel a lump in our own throat, when he heals a sick boy, in the presence of his father.

But, what do we do with Jesus once he leaves us? I mean, isn’t that what Ascension Sunday is about – when Jesus leaves? You have heard our scripture readings from Luke and Acts. Jesus gives a farewell speech, briefs them on their orders, and then lifts up his hands, and whoosh, like a human elevator, is taken up into heaven. At least, that is how Acts tells it. In the Gospel of Luke, considered to be authored by the same as Acts, Jesus withdraws and is carried up into thin air.

Imagine this small crowd craning their necks heavenward to see the last glimpse of Jesus, his robes flapping as he is disappearing in the clouds. The artist, Salvador Dali, renders this scene rather well in one of his paintings from 1958, where all you really see of Jesus are the soles of his feet. Just picture these disciples squinting as Jesus ascends higher and higher until he just disappears. While I have never personally watched a space shuttle launch I suppose it is similar: holding fast your gaze until there is nothing more to see.

What is interesting, telling and somewhat amusing, is how the story of the Ascension ends according to Acts. A small crowd gawks up in the sky at this unbelievable and startling sight of Jesus rocketing up above the clouds. They are looking until their eyes burn and their necks ache. Meanwhile, two men in white robes stood by them. No one seems to notice the men, because, they are squinting into the sky, so the two men in white robes speak up and say: “*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus...will come back ...*”

What does all this mean? What are we suppose to do now that Jesus is gone? Or, maybe, Luke is trying to tell us that God’s presence is not simply going to be in the clouds. Perhaps, it is a reminder that Jesus has not really *gone* anywhere.

You see we have been told since the birth of Jesus, that not only is Jesus the Son of God, but that Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus is the very presence of God on earth. Heaven and earth no longer separate the holy from

the terrestrial. Neither is the living or dying separated from the realm of God, because Jesus has been there, done that. Maureen Memeza writes in *The Christian Century*, “The Universe is a sacrament of the presence of God...nothing human is alien to God.”

Now, we are his body and his blood in this world. He has not gone or crossed over so much, as the Ascension reminds us of his living in each of us - God with us, God within us, God among us.

These stories in scripture (the ascension of Jesus into heaven is only mentioned in two other passages of scripture) are not simply about God is here, for God never left the building. The ascension is a call to testify; a call to give *witness*.

Galileans, so say the men in white, “*what are you doing gawking at the sky?*” That last part is my translation. Regardless of word choice, these messengers of God ask, “why are you still staring, still gawking?”

Let me quickly say, that there is a time for faithful watching; staring hard at something until your neck aches. We see sacredness when we faithfully watch and abide. Many of the beautiful displays in this universe are only rewarded by our vigilant watching. Some years ago, I was out backpacking with a few other friends and we ended up one evening on the top of Mt. Laconte in North Carolina. The temperatures had dropped once the sun set, but the skies were crystal clear. Someone mentioned among the four of us, that there was suppose to be a meteor shower that night, so all four of us sprawled on our backs on the top of an open rock face and stared deep into the night sky. Only through faithful gazing did we see streaks in the sky, though, not all of us saw all there was. I am reminded of the many times when my back is on the grass and my eyes are looking hard into the sky— looking, figuring, pondering, searching. Rarely do we see much in life through casual glance.

It is not just the night sky that calls us to be sentinels. How many times have I visited the sterile and metallic rooms of a hospital and leaned in, to look into the searching eyes of a church member who is watching and waiting. I am trying to be faithful in the listening and looking, because together we want to see health and wholeness. And when the news is not good, we are still looking, are we not, either for answers, or for hope, or for courage, or for faith. Faithful attendance, faithful abiding is watching with one another.

There is a place for looking up until your neck hurts for the Holy One who seems to be disappearing. When our watching, however, turns to gawking, the men in white call us back from our staring, lest we fail to see that God has not left us at all, but actually wants to work through us and with us.

Gawking of course, is the convenient choice. When we gawk our way through life, there is not much commitment. We can become admirers, spectators, voyeurs of the faith. We can be, in the parlance of Facebook, “Fans of Jesus.” When you gape and gaze there is no real engagement, no significant responsibility, and no rigorous work that will be required.

Churches across the globe have their fair share of gawkers. These are the ones that buy the books promising easy solutions to complex problems. They don’t want to hear that following Jesus will not make you rich, or healthy, or protect your family, or protect you from all harm. Gawkers consider worship, ministries, and church in general, to be for their benefit and their edification and their convenience. When we gawk our way through life, worship is reduced to a spectator sport, where the choir, ministers, and lay leaders put on a show, and if we decide we don’t like the show, well we just won’t go. Of course, if our only point to gawk, gape, and stare, then I suppose we can just come and go as we please.

It is these two men in white robes, though, who really get my attention. “What are you doing gawking in the sky?” God is not simply up there, high and removed. God is here, and because God is here there is work to do, life to live, and a purpose to be embraced.

Don't look up, look around. There are neighbors to be loved and there are hungers to be met. And for goodness sake, let's love people into the kingdom instead of trying to storm the gates. Jesus called on us to be witnesses, which means we give our testimony of what Jesus did, what Jesus said, and how Jesus loved.

In Acts, the disciples wanted to know in verse 6, when was the kingdom of Israel going to be restored. They are still believing that their deliverance will come by the political powers. When will "*we know...*" they ask. Jesus shifts the focus from "knowledge" to "mission."

You have probably never heard of Hirschel Mordichai. He was born in Prussia and came from a long line of Rabbis. He was trained, however, as a lawyer. He and his wife lived among Protestant Christian neighbors. While they desired to work, no work was given to them. "We're qualified, we're clerks, we can work for the court, we can work for a business, and we have our credentials." The reason this Jewish couple now living in Germany could not find work was because they were not members of the church. And so, the couple, to avoid starving to death, submitted to the baptism of the local church. Their son grew up to resent his parents forced conversion. His name, by the way, was Karl Marx. Karl Marx grew up so incensed that the church would hurt his parents, that he became a huge enemy of all that we love, all because somebody misunderstood what it means to "be witnesses."

Now, good people of Jesus' instructions, both in Luke's gospel and in Acts, was to go out and **love** others into the faith by their witnesses. You remember, how Jesus said, that the two greatest commandments are to love God and love your neighbor. Reach them and teach them. No gimmicks. No consumer techniques. No spectacular shows.

We cannot do this by gawking into the sky, but by looking around and living as if we believed God really is here among us. And, if we actually believe in this whole Trinity, God in three persons, relating and being, then we best be engaged in this world and all those in the shadow of the steeple.

I shared with you, the church, some important things last week that bears repeating. We are a city on *this* hill, teaching and learning; sharing and engaging; being and living, as the presence of Christ. As we build, as we grow, and as we serve, I ask you to commit with your presence in our worship each Sunday. I need you here each Sunday, because everything we do is to be birthed out of our corporate devotion and celebration. It is a time where we really believe that God is in *this very room*. I need you also to hold up our mission, as we move ahead. Finally, I need you to pray that God would continue to impart upon us fresh vision, as we love God and love our neighbor. We are to be a sending church, where the sanctuary becomes the launching pad for missional engagement.

Church is not a place, we are a people. Church is not about program participation; church is about passionate purpose.