

## ***Where is Your Focus?***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

He was gone. Jesus, that is. He was the focus for his friends of their passion to learn and grow. He was their inspiration, their... everything. Now gone. Just like that the story echoes much earlier story from the Hebrew Bible where elder prophet Elijah imparts some final words of wisdom to his protégé Elisha, then in a wondrous spectacle, a chariot of fire carries him up into the heavens; don't the truly great stories have fire coming from the heavens? Elijah was gone.

Spectacular moments... then, quiet.

Dawn is breaking around me right now, and there is quiet in the air. A beauty, but also an aloneness. That can be unnerving. But then I listen, and I hear the soundscape of Creation. I am not alone. We are not alone at all. But it depends on where our focus is directed.

The aloneness of those disciples in today's story, eyes drawn upward toward the empty sky – their grief is an experience I think we all can connect with. Sometime in our lives we have felt left behind, lost, alone.

My first years away from my childhood home to attend university, they made me feel alone, at times. Gone were the comforting, familiar voices of my family, The sounds of home like work in the kitchen, conversations. I wanted to just hide away in my room. In fact, each transition in my life has tempted me to focus my eyes away from my present reality, life and God's opportunities beckoning me – with all their possibility, and challenge.

Think of the different changes you have experienced in your life – creating a sense of home, then moving from it. Job changes in your life, or, coping with the limbo time in between jobs. In those moments of feeling uprooted, alone, even lost, we can tend to gaze nostalgically back towards what was. It's difficult in those times to open your eyes and heart towards your present reality. Reality is often not very comfortable.

Like our family camping vacations where we bring the tent. I dream of the comforts of home the entire car ride to wherever we will be camping. But then, once we've planted ourselves, our tent, organized our gear, I can get out into the bush. When I pay attention with ears and heart tuned in, if I'm open to connecting, I inevitably feel the sacredness of it all.

I'm outside today as I ponder the message of Jesus' ascension. Jesus suddenly drawn upward; the tone of the story suggests a sense of surprise at this moment. Followers of Jesus jolted from how wonderful it must have been to speak with Jesus. Even those rather terse words he gave them when they wanted to know when God's kin-dom was going to come. Jesus responded, "Even the Son of Man doesn't know that day." These interactions with Jesus must have been so lovely for them. Miraculous, even, considering just a few weeks ago he was hanging on a cross. In the blink of an eye, change can come.

Here, I have left the relative safety of my makeshift basement rec room studio. At home I can control my surrounding, all my things set up just so as we record worship. Here, I have no idea how this is going to go. I'm resonating with those disciples... looking up.

The storyteller, the writer of the Gospel of Luke who also writes a sequel in the Book of Acts, describes angelic figures suddenly jolting the upward-looking disciples into reality.

*Why do you look up? He is gone to be with God. You must go now. Stop looking up - look at one another, and pay attention to what God has called you to do now. Focus on here, now, on caring, and building a community that lives out the spirit of love that Jesus has taught you.*

Right here, in this little portion of Creation, when I pay attention, when I connect with it, touch... listen... feel ... and respond ... grief subsides. The lost feeling ebbs and flows. It doesn't go away. Nor will the collective malaise we all feel at times within the rhythms defined so much by pandemic-normal living.

But maybe we can all take a lesson from this story in the book of Acts; when we try to refocus our attention from our day-to-day sameness in our routines, our isolation, when we try to find every opportunity to connect – connect with people by calling someone, or getting involved with something online that connects us with causes, with caring for people, with actions that our hearts lead us to.

Sometimes intentionally shifting our focus from comfortable nostalgia, or looking up (avoiding the here-and-now reality). Maybe we will connect with our mission. Yes, I said *mission*; that Whoever or Whatever it is that your Creator has put you on this earth to be and do.

I've heard people who could feel sorry for themselves, stuck in an apartment or home because they are particularly vulnerable to catching the coronavirus, I hear stories daily about how they call people whom they know are suffering more than they are. People are turning to social media, particularly the pages where people make a plea for themselves or others. I notice that often someone is responding quickly with a wholehearted offer to help – to get groceries, donate furniture for an empty apartment.

I hear often the refrain from Scripture I learned as a child:

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.<sup>1</sup>*

The writer of Luke focuses on Jesus, but in writing the book of Acts that same storyteller shifts our attention to focus on the people who had to cope with grief in losing Jesus; living in limbo, really. This moment of Jesus Ascending into the heavens and disappearing is where the rubber hits the road. Followers now have to live those values of loving unconditionally, and sharing with generosity. The community refocuses their gaze from up to out. We are invited daily to practice that exercise too. Intentionally shifting our focus from escape and limbo mode, to connecting with your heart and spirit and engaging the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews chapter 13, verse 2. New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission.

I'm going to listen now as I finish. Strange as this is for me, I'm going to experience it. Listening... watching... being thankful for this. And, thankfulness shifts my focus to my present reality too. How can you shift your focus from the malaise of pandemic life to living gratefully, generously... Reaching out. Giving. Sharing. That is the focus of the Book of Acts. Faithful and generous living in a chaotic world. Amen.