SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

May 21, 2023

*Don’t Look Up* Acts 1:1-11

Some of you may recognize the title of today’s sermon as being the title of a movie that came out on Netflix about a year ago. The movie uses a story about an impending world-killing comet to satirize the reaction of popular culture to climate change. The movie especially lampoons scientists, political leaders, policymakers, and international tech moguls and entrepreneurs.

The title, then, becomes a public directive—“don’t look up!”

“Don’t look up” and see what is really there. “Don’t look up” because you might see the danger and begin to actually take action to save yourself and the world from destruction.

“Don’t look up” because if the people of the world start insisting that their leaders do something new and innovative to save the world, we might just have to work together. We might have to actually trust each other and help each other. We may even stop competing with each other long enough to help save our lives—*all* lives.

Such cooperative relationships are an ideal that most people hope for. Such relationships are what you and I pray for.

Unfortunately, multinational cooperation can also be dangerous to the supremacy and fortune of some political leaders—the ones who care only about power and position.

Also, were peaceful cooperation, where knowledge and advances in production, in resource and in development that is pooled and shared—if this was to replace competition, it could also threaten the wealth of multinational conglomerate moguls across the globe. So, don’t look up—because it could change everything.

Believe it or not, that is also what is happening in the passage Paul just read for us. The characters and the place and time are all different, but the stakes are very much the same.

Thankfully, there is no world-killing comet on a collision course with the earth. Instead, the Risen Christ, who has been teaching and walking among the disciples since Easter morning some forty days ago, has said goodbye to them one final time, and is ascending to be with God, rising up beyond their reach.

Yet, it must be said that Jesus’ ascension at the end of this period does not represent a glorious ending to his life here on earth. There is no parting of the clouds and a heavenly voice declaring glory, glory, glory for Jesus. Instead, he rises and rises until he is gone.

Yet it is important to note that while this is a quiet affair, and a rather private one, Jesus’ ascension launches the disciples and the whole of humankind into a new beginning—the beginning of Christ’s church.

As we heard in verse 5, Jesus predicts the birth of the church by saying, “you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Hearing this, the disciples—the very ones who have so closely experienced the miracle of the Risen Christ for forty days—they are not satisfied with this. They also feel the need to know if “this is the time when [Jesus] will restore the kingdom to Israel.” [v.7] In other words: *is this the time we can expect to come into our power and glory?*

Instead of directly answering their question, Jesus extends a different gift to his followers—empowerment. The power of the Holy Spirit is to come upon them and transform them from disciples without a teacher to Christ’s representatives and witnesses—with a testimony and conviction that will extend even “to the ends of the earth” [v. 8]

With these words, Christ is enveloped by a cloud.

Not quite able to believe what has just happened, the disciples remain standing there staring up at the sky. Christ is no longer in sight, but they still can not stop straining their eyes a little harder and stretching their necks a little farther—probably in hopes of catching one last glimpse of him.

Most of us know what that is like because we have done something like this ourselves. We have done it with a child who is going off to school by themself for the first time. We might have watched a loved one out of sight—and beyond—as they joined a company in the military. We watched that child or spouse with eyes and hearts filled with tears—proud but also concerned.

We have also watched loved ones as they were rolled away on hospital gurneys. We held their hand until the very last moment, but then let go as they were taken into the care of the doctors and nurses. We stare at the doors that close behind them, or at the corner that was turned.

We watch at funerals, too. We drop flowers onto the vault and often, we stay until the groundskeepers have covered it with soil. Even after that has happened, we stare at the grave for a long moment.

I wonder if all of this staring is an effort to see—not the future. For those of us who have just watched a loved one leave our sight, the future is of no good use. The future is a mystery. It is the unknown and unfamiliar. It is a place where things will be different—all life will be different. That is all we know, and is not a comfortable thought.

In the case of the disciples, the only thing they knew about their future was that it was not going to include their beloved teacher. Jesus was now really and truly gone from their lives. As they stared, hard, up into the sky, I believe it was with the hope that somehow they could be propelled—not into the future but back into the past.

If they stared hard enough, perhaps they would see him returning. To their minds, this was not as outlandish a thought as it might once have been. Afterall, just a few short weeks ago, he had returned after painfully dying on a cross. Perhaps he would again this time, too.

Thank goodness for the two men in white who were available at just that moment to jolt them back to the present.

I find it curious that they promise the disciples exactly what they were hoping to see as they gazed so intently at the place in the sky where Jesus had been just a few seconds ago. The two men assure the disciples that Christ will return in the same way he left them.

The suggestion seems to be that they need only wait a little longer. However, the most important quality of their comment was that it succeeded in getting the disciples to lower their eyes from the heavens, and back here to earth.

Once they had stopped their preoccupation with what had just happened, they were able to think about Jesus’ words to them. They were able to remember his directions to them to stay in Jerusalem and to wait.

Once they had been jolted out of the thought of Jesus being among them again, they were able to remember his instruction and his promise—the promise was the Spirit.

They were to wait for the Spirit. Indeed, Jesus had made them an exciting promise. The Spirit was not only going to come down to be with them, but they were going to be baptized in the Spirit—full immersion—they were going to be drenched, saturated, sopping wet in the Spirit.

And all of this was going to happen to them so that their lives, and all who receive the Spirit into their lives, will have the same power to overcome all obstacles that life brings into our daily living—all the obstacles that make us afraid or feel lost or diminished in some way.

Through the Spirit, the disciples are promised they will be given the power to be Jesus’ witnesses here on earth. Through the Spirit, all people—from the first disciples in the passage from the Book of Acts we heard proclaimed this morning, to everyone here in this Sanctuary and beyond—we have received the power to love—this is what it means to bear witness to Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit brings us the potential to love as Jesus loved—fully, selflessly, even sacrificially.

The two figures in white robes helped the disciples remember this. They got the disciples to see that instead of magnifying the miracle of ascension, they are supposed to get back to their discipleship roles here on earth. Thus, when the white-robed messengers foretell Jesus’ eventual return, the disciples apparently get the hint that they had best be about Jesus’ directive of “witnessing.”

Since they have no way of knowing when Jesus will return, they have no time to lose. There were still a few more days of waiting, but this time they would not look into the empty skies above them. This time they would stand, or sit, or cook, or farm, or fish, or walk—all of the daily business of life—they would live, and all of this was going to be carried out beside one another.

Most of all, they would all pray together. They would listen to one another’s prayers, and they would look around and beyond their own group to see how the needs of others were also on display all around them. They would see where the love of God needed to go.

This brings us back to the movie that this sermon was titled after.

It is a very secular movie—most of it. Toward the very end of the movie, the comet has gotten close enough to the earth and is beginning to cause catastrophic shaking and trembling. The gravitational fields of both the earth and the comet are at war with one another and the result being both are being torn apart.

One group of people, the main astronomer who discovered the collision course with the comet (he was the main character), and a group of his friends, have gathered in the home and with the family of the astronomer, which he had abandoned earlier.

As the world collapses around them, this little group sits at a dinner table together one last time. They hold hands. They do not look up. They look at what is most important to them in that moment. They look into the faces of family and friends.

From the moment the two men in white admonished them and brought them back to earth, the disciples also did not look up. Instead, they became Jesus’s witnesses here on earth. They told the world about his love—sometimes, they even used words.

Mostly, though, they went out among people and ministered to them in Jesus’ name. They told of Jesus and his love by binding up wounds, by feeding hungry people, by nursing the sick, and also by building hospitals and schools. They proclaimed Jesus as they went out to live among people who were very different from themselves, even those who were hostile to new commers.

They still do this. *We* still do this and I pray we will always will—as a church but also as individuals.

In this day and time, I pray we will still proclaim Christ by finding ways to love the people around us. The ones we know, and the ones we still need to meet. Even the ones we will never meet.

I pray that instead of looking up, we will look all around us to find those people and those places where the love of God is most needed—among the poor, the lonely, and the sick. However, I hope we will also be unafraid and move decisively toward those whom we see are suffering in other ways, too.

I hope we will go among

* the many women throughout our country who are facing an uncertain future when it comes to autonomy over their own bodies, and healthcare that addresses *all* of our needs with dignity and compassion;
* among women and children in many places around the world where education is denied them because of class and culture;
* among all who are differently abled, differently oriented, differently – you fill in the blank; there are so many ways in which we find ourselves excluding others. Let us receive the Spirit and go and proclaim Christ’s love there, too.

 I hope we will go into the forests, wade into the waters, and also shelter living

creatures—including ourselves—whose lives are threatened by industrial interests that often destroy habitat and ecosystems in their quest for more profit and power.

All of this requires that we follow the prompting of those men in white, who saw the disciples still staring up into the clear, empty sky, wondering after Jesus, and redirected their eyes, their hearts, and their lives.

Friends, please, don’t look up, and don’t look back.

Look instead to Christ whose Holy Spirit is waiting to fill our lives with her power.

Look around you to see where that powerful love needs to go. And most of all, look around and see God in whose image is stamped in every face you see, and give thanks for the love that dwells among us. Amen.