

Why do you stand looking toward heaven? This might be the most important question in all of Scripture.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection are described by four gospels, and referred to in one way or another in all the books of the New Testament. Jesus' activity – his purpose and mission – have been the subject of thousands of theological arguments. Jesus' presence is the thing that matters – from his birth to well beyond – as evidence that God cares enough to be 'with us' (whatever that means to you) So why (ask the heavenly visitors) do you stand looking heavenward?

It's a good question, given that we've devoted ourselves to being followers of Jesus. It seems to me that our 'following' concerns earthly things, doesn't it? True, one day all will die, and we will 'follow Jesus' on a different path. But until then, why are you stuck looking toward heaven?

Looking for the promise of something better? Don't worry, that will come soon enough.

Looking for some sign or wonder? Plenty of those to be found hereabouts – no need to look further than the person standing next to you.

Perhaps you don't want to miss out on Jesus' spectacular return? But haven't you heard? "I am with you always – to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

A fixation on heavenly things – the sad notion that only in heaven will we ever be 'complete' – this paralyzing idea that our eternal goal is more important than our present situation – each of these contribute to the general opinion that the church (or religion/faith in individuals) is a load of irrelevant nonsense.

The exchange at the end of our reading from Acts today seems to me a push in the direction of living in the moment, especially when that moment is difficult.

The Ascension of Jesus is one of those moments in Scripture that calls for a particular kind of open-mindedness. The faithful in the twenty-first Century have to grapple with a different understanding of the relationship between earth and the rest of the cosmos. It seems that the more we learn about the structure of the universe, the more we have to consider where heaven is and what it might be like.

No more can we wave broadly at the sky and imagine a 'kingdom in the clouds.' I've been in the clouds. I've seen photos of the earth from space. People who have been to the moon, or lived on the space station, return with new insight into the interrelatedness of humanity – and of our connection to creation – and still the thing that some must grapple with is the self-satisfied of the leader of the Soviet Union who declared "Gagarin flew into space, but didn't see any god there."

For all that, Heaven is still very much a part of Christian understanding.

We want to know that 'God is in heaven and all's right with the world.' We want something to aspire to; something to hope for; some refuge and reward for a life 'well lived.' We imagine heaven as some sort of exclusive, life-after-death club, where Jesus is the DJ, directing the constant praise, and God occupies a VVIP booth so as to receive the eternal good wishes of God's people...and 'good Christians' here on earth are the bouncers.

We decide who gets in and who does not. We, claiming divine authority, set the rules and enforce them at our discretion. Heaven is a place, all right – and Jesus is there, to be sure. Didn't his disciples seem him go? And won't he return to give us all our final marks – to let us know whether or not we've finally 'gained admittance?'

This is the order of things that most of us are familiar with. Laid out in the creed – preached at us from various pulpits – enshrined in classic literature (Dante, anyone) – and affirmed by centuries of music making. And all this convinces many fine, faithful folk that the best we can do is wait. Stand ready, gazing into heaven – because you don't want to miss the moment.

We are riveted by the Ascension, for the same reason all the other marvels and miracles of Scripture hold our attention. A glorious leave-taking, heavenly voices, promises of deliverance; the Ascension has it all. And who, after such traumatic changes of fortune as the disciples had endured, wouldn't want to follow Jesus straight into God's glorious, eternal presence?

But Jesus words are what matter here. Not 'I'll see you soon,' but rather:

'wait there (in Jerusalem) for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

There was work to be done on earth. The kingdom was near – Jesus often said so – and the work of the faithful was to be aware of those kingdom signs – to live in an awareness of God's present and emerging reign in the here and now. They had just

witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and death, only to encounter him in the flesh – wounds and all – IN THE REAL WORLD – until, spectacularly, “as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Heaven has been an attractive idea and the goal of Jesus followers ever since.

But here and now – twenty-one centuries on – we struggle. Caught between tradition and practical necessity, often forced to give half-hearted assent to something that can no longer be easily imagined, we wind up believing in nothing at all. We sing the hymns and say the words and hear the stories of those astonished early witnesses and decide (with some regret) that those were just different times.

But faith is adaptable, and God is tirelessly eternal, and Jesus left us a glorious and challenging task. Wait on God's promise, and then tell the world about God's wonders. It seemed an impossible task to the first disciples, yet they found the power to act – the will to witness.

The task remains the same. Heaven, what ever that means to you still waits. An 'eternal reward' must have a destination. But we are pilgrims on a journey. We have decided to follow Jesus. And that means the promise kingdom is waiting for us – just around the corner – as close as your next joyful, holy encounter.

Why do you stand gazing toward heaven? There's work and wonder waiting for us here on earth.