

Standing looking at the sky

Acts 1: 6-14 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

Why are you Galileans standing here and looking up into the sky? Acts 1:11

Dear friends, don't be surprised or shocked that you are going through testing that is like walking through fire. God cares for you, so turn all your worries over to him. 1 Peter 4:12

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Spoiler alert – the bible readings we heard this morning are not my main focus. I am not intending to talk about these times as 'suffering and persecution'. Instead, I am going to work from another in today's lectionary: the story at the beginning of Acts where Jesus 'disappears' in a cloud to heaven.

Acts 1:6-14 *Jesus Is Taken to Heaven*

⁶ While the apostles were still with Jesus, they asked him, "Lord, are you now going to give Israel its own king again?"

⁷ Jesus said to them, "You don't need to know the time of those events that only the Father controls. ⁸ But the Holy Spirit will come upon you and give you power. Then you will tell everyone about me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and everywhere in the world." ⁹ After Jesus had said this and while they were watching, he was taken up into a cloud. They could not see him, ¹⁰ but as he went up, they kept looking up into the sky.

Suddenly two men dressed in white clothes were standing there beside them. ¹¹ They said, "Why are you men from Galilee standing here and looking up into the sky? Jesus has been taken to heaven. But he will come back in the same way that you have seen him go."

Someone to Take the Place of Judas

¹²⁻¹³ The Mount of Olives was almost a kilometre from Jerusalem. Eleven apostles had gone there.

After the apostles returned to the city, they went upstairs to the room where they had been staying.

¹⁴ The apostles often met together and prayed with a single purpose in mind. The women and Mary the mother of Jesus would meet with them, and so would his brothers. Contemporary English Version (CEV)

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For the past eight weeks I have been 'working from home'. I'm part of a fortunate sector of Australian adults who are employed, unexposed to infectious risk, do not have to commute, and can wear furry slippers at their desk.

For sure, the boundary between 'work' and 'not-work' is blurred. The notional 40-hour week has been constantly exceeded. I see items at the end of the evening news bulletin, intended to cheer people with lighter stories of 'coping under lockdown'. Sometimes I marvel at people who wonder what to do with their day – those who form family garage bands, bake bread, tidy cupboards, learn to knit, or perform online dance routines. One of my sisters has read 38 books. Another does 1000-piece jigsaws. A third is renovating her house. I am glad when I have time to walk to the duckpond and back. But these are almost trivial responses in our country exceedingly lightly affected, by world standards. Overall, our nation has reserves of funds, stable infrastructure, a government we largely trust, and more, better-spaced housing than many nations.

Our global situation is serious, unusual, uncertain, and frightening. But it is not the first time that humans have cowered at home without freedom to meet, shop, attend live events, and travel. In the 14th Century, Black Death – plague – killed 2 in every 3 people in the known world. It still does in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Humans, as well as infectious diseases, can and do disrupt life and community. Palestine, for example. Warsaw during the 1940s where almost 400 thousand Jews died of illness, starvation, were killed or sent to concentration camps in 18 months of lock down. The Yazidi community in 2014, was besieged in the Sinjar mountains.

Fear, vulnerability, and self-imposed lockdown also affected Jesus' followers after his death. They self-isolated, terrified that they, too, would be arrested for associating with Jesus. After a few encounters with Jesus in surprising circumstances, their confidence began to rise. First, in the upper room where Jesus wished them peace: Shalom. This reminded them of what Jesus had taught them about God's kingdom – of justice and well-being; tranquillity and prosperity; security and freedom: functional community. Jesus' *Shalom* was a blessing, a sign of God's grace and of God's presence. Later, they met Jesus on a beach by the lake where he added the blessing of food. This reminded the followers that sharing a meal is a key way to make God visible. On the foot journey to Emmaus, Jesus revealed God hidden within strangers and in acts of welcome.

Where do they see Jesus again? Chatting on a mountainside with them about the Holy Spirit, before he disappeared into a cloud . . . another unexpected turn of events. Two angels came to interpret things and ask:

“Why are you Galileans standing here and looking up into the sky? Jesus has been taken to heaven. But he will come back in the same way that you have seen him go.”

What happened next? Closure? Or a new beginning? Both. They went back to the room they’d been staying in for the past few weeks, and with ‘single purpose’ *they all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.* (Acts 6:14)

They replaced the missing disciple. They got on with talking about God as Jesus had. They shared stories and food. They shared themselves. They moved from sky to earth. They did not forget their awe at God’s greatness – but they did not remain staring at the sky. They put feet on the ground and lived with a new purpose, acting out Jesus’ model of behaving, and holding on to the Shalom invested in them through the Holy Spirit.

Whatever our situation, it is the current ‘normal’. It *is* life. Life is *always* now. A piece I listened to on ABC radio last month outlined ten attitudes that followers of Jesus nowadays can practise during these altered times. Although separated from people, we don’t have to isolate ourselves from sources of renewal. We can find what gives joy; relish simplicity; strip away the need to be in control; become friends with parts of our true self that we have covered or neglected; celebrate abundance; act kindly; rediscover humble attention instead of having to know and be right; choose hope. Above all, we can rest in the strength of God who is with us and cares for us.

My Jewish colleague, Rahel, says every time she hears COVID pronounced to rhyme with 'cough-it' it sounds like the Hebrew word:

כבוד *kavod* – *honour, glory*, related to *kibud* – *strength*. Same letters, same origin, just different in tone.

It gives her hope, reminding her of God's Being.

We continue to live in the shadow of this pandemic, but even without a pandemic we never know the future. And Jesus warns against trying to.

Instead of worrying, let’s imitate the early followers of Jesus. Let us work together, and in our own places, to make God visible – look up at the sky and worship; also put your feet on the ground to walk humbly, gratefully, gently; rejoicing always and praying constantly. This is our calling and our gift.

May the Holy Spirit fill us, and may God’s Shalom extend to all corners of our heart, our neighbourhood, and our earth. AMEN

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REF: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/practices-of-resistance-coronavirus-lockdown/12164370>
