

Looking Up, Moving Forward
A Meditation for the Table
Lessons: Ephesians 1:18-23, Acts 1:6-11

Listen to the apostles: "Lord, you are risen. Now are we going to throw out the foreigners and bring back the glory of the nation to us chosen people who belong?"

How often do you hear that same question in some of the editorials these days? I always remember an editorial cartoon from years ago: in the first panel, an angry man dressed in a Plymouth pilgrim costume was saying, "All the problems in this country are because of those immigrants!"; and in the second panel, a man in buckskins with feathers in his hair and warpaint on his face was saying: "I agree completely." What we see is often shaped by what we think we already know.

Listen to the apostles in this passage: After living with Jesus for three years, seeing miracles and hearing lessons, ...after giving up on him in defeat, then seeing him literally do what he said he would do and come back to them from a cross and tomb, they still are locked in their fear, still stuck in seeing him as the Savior they know will redeem the true nation and restore the pure temple. They want Jesus to give them the old dream that never was.

Listen to Jesus' response: He stays true to the different way he sees the same things they are seeing. He still trusts that the same Spirit who has guided him – the same power who raised him from the dead – will perform a miracle on the apostles, will give them spiritual sight for their blindness, give them courage to trust God's ways, transform their weakness into a witness in the world. "... when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me."

They had seen his risen presence. They had recognized his voice. They had gathered again at table with him. He had come back different, and they saw the Spirit-power more clearly. But they were the same. Just think what he would do now, just think what would happen now! All those hopes and dreams were not lost now. He was more than he had ever been. He would lead them to glory days and temples gold. Then a cloud covered their dream, and hid him from their sight. He was gone, just like that. "They still had their eyes fixed on the sky as he went away." What would they do now, ... beside look up to a sky covered with clouds? "... when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me."

One of the early Duke Old Testament professors was just retiring my first year in Divinity School, 1970. He told a wonderful story on himself, and others said it was actually true. In a class, he had been explaining that the Cecil B DeMille version of the wall of water parting of the Red Sea was a bit of hyperbole. Actually, it was the Reed Sea rather than the Red, and it was a marsh more than lake. A hot sierra wind blew across the marsh and dried it up enough for the Hebrews to walk across, but Pharoah's heavy chariots got mired in the mud. The same wind saved them, but in a different way that we sometimes think. Oh, by the way, wind and spirit were very closely identified in Hebrew. A student raised his hand to ask, "But Dr. Steinspring, what happens if we

explain away all the miracles? What do we do without the resurrection?" In his gentle, kind way, Dr. Steinspring replied, "Son, some miracles you just have to take straight."

The Reed Sea is a miracle if you know the Spirit is in the wind. The Ascension is a miracle if you look through the cloud. The How is not really a problem unless you have some limited ideas about the Who? God might be performing miracles in the ordinary events of your daily life, or in the changes in a church. The new life you have been given, the presence and power of the Spirit, is real if you can just trust the Spirit in the wind and cloud, and take the grace straight from the source. "... when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me."

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This table is all about remembering how our seeing has to get past our already knowing, so that we can trust the mystery of what the Spirit can do with us. At this table – our ordinary lives are "re-membered" to his Body, his Spirit, his trust, his vision, his work – You take loaf and cup, and "... when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me."

This table is the best place to see past the way we already see, to trust the power of the Spirit who always comes, to believe in mystery and miracles again, to admit how little we know that gives us every reason to believe what we have never understood. This table, this meal, is a miracle right in front of our own eyes, a strange meeting with the presence of the risen Lord. And "some miracles you just have to take straight." "... when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me."

"Why are you standing there looking up at the sky?" Trusting Christ is about overcoming the inertia of what you already know, about reversing habits ingrained, changing attitudes about relationships, getting new glasses and new perspectives, taking up new disciplines — even some spiritual ones, ...and believing in miracles. Faith is more than looking up. Trust is about moving forward because Christ is leading, about obeying because he commands, about living his love because he has loved you first and promised you that nothing can separate you from his love. "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age. "... when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me."

If you just look on the surface of the things, if you pride yourself on being realistic and careful, the only thing you can see is on a table is some bread and grape juice – and not enough to feed twelve of us, much less the whole room. So long as you sit here looking around worrying about your weaknesses and thinking some pastor/leader/savior is going to turn things around, you will become exactly what you predict.

But if you see though the loaf and cup that he blesses, if you see the body and blood that makes you part of the Body of Christ, if you do more than look up at the clouds and see...clouds, if we do what he commands and "take and eat..." Here at the dawn of new possibilities in the power of the Holy Spirit to work among you, if you keep your

caution and guard against risk and settle for less than complete commitment to the power of Holy Spirit, then the coming of a new pastor will not change much of anything around you. You must understand before she comes that the cause of the sameness is staring up at the cloud, and seeing only the cloud. The miracle of the power of Holy Spirit has already come to you, and you are staring at it every time you see the loaf and cup.

Paul reminds the church in Ephesus: "You will know what is the hope to which God has called you, how rich are the wonderful blessings God promises, and how very great is the power at work in us who believe. This power working in us is the same as the mighty strength which God used to raise Christ from death."

"... when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me."

The early Christians trusted the mystery of forgiving love and the miracle of Spirit power. As different as every one of those little congregations were, they had one thing in common: they believed that the miracle of the appearances of a risen Lord had become the power of the presence of his Holy Spirit. He said he would be with them always before he left, and the wind of Spirit had blown away the clouds. Why would they just stand there frozen looking up to the sky? They had God's work to do!