

The Empty Sky
Ascension Sunday
Acts 1:1-14
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Elizabeth Mangham Lott

Have you found yourself standing in this place before? Enthusiastic and confident, then increasingly confused, finally stunned and uncertain of what is up or down. When we find ourselves—alone or in community—unsure of what comes next and waiting for God to act, we are facing the empty sky.

It's Ascension Sunday on the church calendar, a day when we look closely at another peculiar, hard-to-explain scene in Jesus' story. At this point, Jesus' followers have been witness to Christ's resurrection for many days. Granted, their encounters with Jesus in those post-resurrection days were shrouded in mystery and Jesus was not always immediately recognizable as the Jesus they'd known. But somehow, gradually and then all-at-once, they knew Jesus was still with them.

But then that cloud came, as it surely comes, and hid him from their site. I have been captivated by this opening story in Acts for all of my adult life. Perhaps more than any other story in scripture, I get this one in a very personal way. The disciples were living good, comfortable lives when Jesus came and interrupted everything. By boat, mid-workday, amidst many mundane activities, he came and gathered them all to apprentice with him and follow his way.

This way of Jesus—with the easy yoke and light burden—wasn't the easiest to follow or understand. He spoke in poetry, metaphor, and story. He angered some pretty important religious and political powers-that-be. The way of Jesus likely often felt just as absurd to the disciples as it did compelling and true and irresistible.

And then he died. No, then he was sentenced to death by the state in a chilling, public execution. And the disciples scattered, some of them returning to their previous jobs as fishermen. But Jesus interrupted their panic and the human tendency to return to comfort and safety. Jesus knew that the human compulsion to seek comfort and safety is often what prevents us from fully committing ourselves to his way.

After his death, he returned. He called them again, fed them again, taught them again, and showed them, again, his way. He told them to love each other whole-heartedly. He repeated his command that big, true, unselfish, unceasing love is how the world will know they are his disciples. It sounds romantic and beautiful to talk that way about the

church; about being people who love each other no matter what, in Jesus' name. But it sure is hard to live that out. And it often means choosing to move away from comfort and safety. But with Jesus teaching and feeding and reminding them, maybe the disciples had a shot.

Ah, but today he is taken away from them again; covered by a cloud. And all they have left is the sky.

We know this moment. On many levels and in myriad ways, we know the feeling of standing, waiting, staring into an obscured way forward. We know what it's like to look all around us and realize we are far from the familiar, old life we once knew. We can't go back, we don't know how to go forward. We stand transfixed in this unbelievable, overwhelming moment.

There are empty sky days and empty sky seasons when we stand alongside the disciples wondering what just happened and what in the world we're going to do about it. Where is God? Why isn't the plan clear? What do we do now?

The marriage we thought was our safe place becomes unpredictable and fragile. There's silence and distance instead of ease and affection. One wrong move, it seems, and the whole thing will fall apart.

Perhaps we have a moment of clarity about a new life path, but hope and certainty disappear just as quickly as they came. The job offer never comes. The days get really long. We don't know which end is up or where to turn.

The phone rings late on a Saturday night, and the news on the other end is not good. The doctors cannot intervene, the family is grieving, and we stare at the clock as we wait.

The stuff of faith, the stories and doctrine we have held firmly as unquestionable truth, begins to shift. The answers don't come with ease anymore. The narratives seem to need a second and third and fourth look. If we want to hold on to any of it, we must hold on to less of it or hold it differently. It's scary. Old friends don't understand. Nothing seems absolute and certain anymore.

Sometimes when it's just us and that empty sky, we get stuck. We freeze. We retreat and then don't know how to put one foot in front of the other.

In the moments of waiting and watching, the moments before knowing if healing or clarity or hope will come, it can feel as though Jesus has been pulled into the clouds and is nowhere in sight. There we stand, much like the apostles, no longer on a journey we have chosen for ourselves, just staring into that sky.

Unlike the days following Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples act differently this time. Their way forward is ours as well.

In our text this morning, there were questions of his plan. Would he restore his kingdom on earth? Even after Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples did not seem to grasp that Jesus did not do things as they expected. Rather than answering the question of restoring a kingdom, Jesus corrected their focus. "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put in his own power. But you will receive power and will be my witnesses." "He shifted the emphasis from speculation about the future to demonstration in the present."¹

The empty sky can be confusing at best and terrifying at worst. But it also stands as an invitation. Jesus reminds us through this text that our call is to be faithful in the present—this day, this moment. When we so badly want to know what stands beyond the cloud, we are redirected back to the moment before us. When we fear the future and want to return to a memory of a former glory, we are guided right back to the place where our feet are today. It's just us and this cloud.

Maybe that's the thing. The disciples no longer see Jesus, but they do look up and see the cloud.

The cloud is an important symbol across scripture. We moderns are quick to read these familiar Biblical stories and miss the big detail so apparent to the original listeners. This cloud was not just some cloud. This cloud is THE cloud intimately known by the ancients—by the very people of God.

"In the OT the incomprehensibility of God is represented by the cloud"—that which hide God from view. Over and over this cloud represents God's presence but also God's hiddenness.²

Daniel, of the lion's den and the fiery furnace, wrote of his many visions. "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the

¹ G.H.C. Macgregor, *The Interpreter's Bible Volume 9: Acts & Romans*, p. 28

² *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "Cloud"

clouds of heaven. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power.”³ It is the cloud that enables God’s people to see God’s presence.

The empty sky before them holds that cloud.

It’s the cloud that signifies God is real and among us but ever mysterious and unknown. I’m kind of amazed that we have to be reminded of this, actually; that we have somehow become a culture that thinks we can own and know and control not just our own lives but the truth of who God is. Then we’re knocked off of our feet when we’re left staring up and unsure of what comes next. Scripture is right before us with this persistent image of a hidden-yet-known God. The God beyond the cloud.

“At the Exodus God gave the Israelites a pillar of cloud to direct them in their march. [The cloud] attended them through the wilderness.”⁴

And when Moses met with God on Mt. Sinai, we read that “the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went up on the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.”⁵

At Christ’s baptism, when God speaks those famous words, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” (Luke 6:35) How does God appear in that place? Well, as a voice that came from a cloud.

So as the disciples stand with Jesus, “In this passage [in Acts 1], Jesus is received into that same cloud.”⁶ The cloud of presence but hiddenness, the cloud of provision but of mystery, the cloud of daily direction without details of future plans—yes, it’s that cloud.

As Jesus is taken from their sight, the apostles are left standing alone, baffled, and wondering what has happened. Then these men appear and ask the obvious, “Why do you stand here looking into the sky?”

³ Daniel 7:13-14

⁴ *Cruden’s Complete Concordance*, p. 96

⁵ Exodus 24:15-18

⁶ Macgregor, p. 29

Isn't that often the way? "At the very moment that we want Jesus to be most vivid something obscures him."⁷

The cloud does not mean that Jesus is no longer real. The cloud covered him from the disciples' sight, but it was not a second death. It is the familiar cloud of presence and mystery; both at the same time.

So, then, in the mystery of the cloud or in the silence of an empty sky, we must remember the lessons Christ taught his disciples and that he still, quietly and curiously, guides us as though with a cloud by day.

We must learn from the apostles first mis-step not to retreat to familiar comforts when we are afraid and unsure. Instead, the lesson of the empty sky is a challenge to be witnesses to Christ's love, of Christ's grace in all places and all days. And when we feel there is no way forward or that we have been left alone to fumble through these days, we must also remember that when Jesus was taken up into the cloud, he did so with the promise of the Spirit coming to dwell within them.

We experience God's presence beyond this cloud in beautiful ways. Consider the way it feels when our voices join together as we sing in worship or speak the words of prayers aloud in unison. We know, somehow, if only for a second, that we are connected to that great cloud of witnesses—all the ones on whose shoulders we stand, all the ones who shaped us and contributed to who we are right now. There are moments when we almost gasp: Oh! That cloud!

This time, the disciples heeded the words of the robed strangers. Virginia pastor Catherine Taylor writes, "There the disciples were, a fragile little community, anxious and bewildered, watching their Lord leave them, but they aren't distraught and sad. When it's all over, they're worshipping with joy." They went on to forever change the history of our world and became the great fathers and mothers of the Church because they trusted that God would continue to strengthen them, guide them, and inspire them. In the midst of confusion and emptiness, they acted on their call to life in Christ and hope for what God will do in the future.

The story of Acts is that of the beginning of the Church, and next week we will gather in a colorful celebration of the birthday of the Church. We will tell the next chapter of the story as the disciples move beyond the empty sky. In the midst of confusion and in the absence of Jesus, the apostles acted on their hope for the future—hope that Jesus

⁷ Theodore P. Ferris, *The Interpreter's Bible Volume 9: Acts & Romans*, p. 29

will return to them someday, hope that his teachings will continue to spread, and hope that they really will love each other so well that the world will be transformed by the love of God, in Jesus' name. While hidden and mysterious, they knew God was still somehow present and providing. So they gathered together in constant prayer and boldly moved back out into the world with hope and focus on their calling.

As a Christian community, we do not encounter empty sky moments alone but together. Together, we search for God's voice. Together, we look for Christ's face. And I believe that together we discover glimpses of what we are longing for, right here in community.

We have stared into the sky many times and we will stand and search it again. But just like those who followed Christ on the Earth some 2000 years ago, we must not get lost staring up at the sky and waiting for some sign up there of life to come. We are called keep moving and to live into the way of Jesus. We are present in this place, and we love as Christ taught us. As we serve and minister together, we just might realize—on our very best of days together—that the very one we are seeking is in the midst of us already, not hidden behind a cloud at all.

May it be so. Amen.