

Sermon: Why Are You Looking Up?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, May 21, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last Thursday, I had privilege of attending the convocation day of the Presbyterian College in Montreal. It was a full-day affair with a lecture in the morning, a luncheon and the evening convocation ceremony at the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul. Actually last week, the Presbyterian College also hosted a 3-day conference, titled simply as the 'Encouragement Conference', inviting clergy and lay leaders in church to gather for a time of encouragement and renewal, through scriptural teaching, vibrant worship, and reflection in the arts. I was surprised to see a number of Presbyterian clergy from the Ottawa area in attendance, as participants to the conference and to the convocation. It was good for me to catch up with some former colleagues in Montreal. It is good to see the bond between presbyterians in the two cities of Ottawa and Montreal remains strong.

The keynote speaker for both the conference and the convocation events was Rebekah Eklund, the associate professor of theology at Loyola University in Maryland, and an ordained minister of the Evangelical Covenant Church. She is the author of a number of books, including *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Jesus' Laments in the New Testament*, the 2nd edition of *Introducing Christian Ethics*, and *The Beatitudes through the Ages*.

You may recall that in one recent sermon, I had alluded to this wonderful book by Eklund, exploring the reception history of the Beatitudes by various communities of the Christian faith. Not too often one gets to meet the author of a book one likes, and I certainly took advantage of that. Professor Eklund did not disappoint. Once again, she explored the Beatitudes, this time in the context of Christian ministry in an increasingly secular North America, seeking to encourage the graduating students through these tried and tested blessings pronounced by Jesus. I felt encouraged seeing myself as one of the poor in spirit being addressed by Christ, and knowing that faithfulness in ministry shall not end in vain, but in inheriting the Kingdom of God.

Among those receiving a degree, was the Rev. Sybil Mosley of the Livingstone Presbyterian Church, who had received the Doctor of Divinity (honours cause) from the Presbyterian College. I know Sybil quite well, having co-worked with her and prayed with her for a number of years at the Presbytery of Montreal. She was being recognized in particular for her service in pastoral ministry, and her service to the wider church, particularly when she served as the Moderator of the Presbytery for three consecutive years, including during the first 18 months of the pandemic. Her ministry has been characterized by humility, compassion, courage and prayerfulness. It was an honour that took her by surprise, but viewed by many as well deserved.

Among the 6 graduating students, 4 of them were from the Institut de theologie pour la francophonie (ITF). When I was serving as a governor on the board of the College, the strategic partnership with ITF, an up-and-coming French language seminary, was an key area we worked hard on. It was good to see this ministry bearing fruit, as the first crop of seminary students in the field of practical theology of the ITF finally graduating, ready to serve in the Francophone Protestant mission field.

All in all, last Thursday was a good day. A busy and long day, but a good day. On my way back to Ottawa that same night, as I was driving, I kept thinking about the graduating students, praying for them, for the challenges that they will be facing. Between graduation and accepting one's first call, there exists a time in-between—a time of discernment, a time of uncertainty, and of waiting. It is not unlike the disciples of Jesus, when they witnessed the departure of their Lord, up up into the sky.

In our Scripture reading this morning of Acts 1:1-11, we come to what is commonly known as the Ascension text. It marks the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, but the promised ministry of the Holy Spirit had yet to begin. It was an in-between time—a time of transition and of great uncertainty.

It is not surprising to find the disciples of Jesus still not quite getting it. Before his departure, they came together to inquire of Jesus, saying, "*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*" After three years of following Jesus, of getting the best theological education there ever was or is, their vision is still narrowly defined by what they had known, what they could see. They still had in their mind, the restoration of an earthly kingdom, of Israel, while a worthy aim in itself, but pales in comparison to what God had in store for the church.

So Jesus replied cryptically but not dismissively, saying, *“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* After saying that, after leaving with them a blueprint of how the church would eventually live out its missionary mandate, as the disciples were watching, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. In essence, the Ascension of Jesus was the convocation ceremony of these disciples.

But why, you may ask, did Jesus have to leave? Why couldn't the risen Lord stay and finish the work—finish what he started in the first place? I think you may have come across this term before, the ‘helicopter parents’—describing those parents who hover too close to their children, whose parenting style are too protective and restrictive, who simply could not let go.

In preparing for this sermon, I came across this list of top ten signs that you have become a helicopter parent (and did not know it). So counting down from 10...

10. You say your kid has never eaten dirt
(and you actually believe yourself).
9. You won't let your son ride the school bus because the driver won't let you get on to check that his seatbelt is securely fastened.
8. Your kids don't go to birthday parties because there are GERMS there.
7. You still cut your son's meat. He's 12.
6. You've completed one of your kids' school projects.
COMPLETED, not helped (yes, there is a difference).
5. You have the principal on speed dial
and keep a list of things to tell her "next time."
4. Your son's friends don't like to come over for playdates
because they don't want to have to play with YOU.
3. You bought your 5-year-old a smartphone so she can text you when the bus gets to kindergarten to let you know they made it OK.
2. There's a nanny cam in your daughter's bedroom.
You don't have a nanny.
1. Your kids' teachers see you coming and instead of greeting you warmly with a smile, they turn and run the other way.

Here is a painful truth that all parents must hear: children need the absence of their parents as much as they need the presence of their love and care. In contrast to the 'helicopter parents', wise parents know when to hover, when to glide, when to turn a blind eye, and when to let go. Because without letting go, your offsprings will never have a chance to fully grow into the person whom he/she is meant to be.

It is the same way with the departure of Jesus. We need the absence of Christ as much as we need the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. Had Jesus actually stayed, now that's an exercise in wild imagination, as it is hard to speculate what might have happened next. But one thing I know with reasonable certainty, is the disciples would not have grown. They would still be fighting over who is the greatest, who gets to sit on the right side or the left side of Jesus. Peter would not have preached that sermon at the Pentecost, he would never become the 'rock' that he was destined, and there may not be much of a church to speak of.

The departure and the absence of Christ is God's blessing to us, but God did not leave us completely alone. *"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."* (v.4-5)

After commissioning them and blessing them, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes, angels of the Lord really, appeared and stood by them. They said, *"Men of Galilee, **why do you stand looking up toward heaven?** This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."*

Why do we still stand looking up toward heaven? The time, the place, or the manner of the return, of the 2nd coming of Jesus Christ, are in God's hand. Meanwhile, we as the church has been given the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of the Lord is on the church mightily. The convocation has long passed, the work of building the kingdom of God is still ahead. Let us get to it.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.