

Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Once a long time ago, someone sent me one of those balloon bouquets and it was delivered to my office in Boston which meant I had to bring it home on the T, which was a very mixed experience. That day, I had left my car at the repair shop so I walked there with my festive bouquet. Seeing my car outside, I decided to tie the balloons to the side mirror instead of bringing them into the building. Upon returning, though, they were no where to be seen; they were gone. I immediately looked up. There was no trace of them. But I stood there for a long time, looking up toward heaven - searching. I gave up when I realized someone waiting in a car had witnessed the whole thing - probably saw the balloons fly away and was amused by my consternation. Feeling foolish, I got in my car and drove away. But occasionally I remember that incident and metaphorically stare up to the sky again, reminding myself how firmly I thought I had tied them. It is hard, sometimes, to stop looking.

There is a poignancy to staring toward heaven, to looking for the lost; a vulnerability. It is a statement of love, of loss, of bereavement – for balloons, keys, a piece of jewelry, a savior, a son.

This is Memorial Day weekend – Memorial Day – a day set aside to honor our dead, our war dead. To honor those families whose son or daughter walked off to war and, in the course of action, seemed to disappear. Some families received their loved ones back with their body intact, Other families received them back in pieces, and still others can only look heavenward. Families of Vietnam veterans are still waiting for news of their POW or MIA – still looking toward an empty sky, yearning for a piece of their loved one – for something to say goodbye to.

I've been saving a poem about a house where a fallen soldier – a Gold Star family – live and have drawn in in their pain. It is only the family dog who gazes into the clouds. The poem is called Driving Home, it's by Charles Simic. I cut it out of a 2007 New Yorker.

*Minister of our coming doom, preaching  
On the car radio, how right  
Your Hell and damnation sound to me  
As I travel these small, bleak roads  
Thinking of the mailman's son  
The Army sent back in a sealed coffin.  
His house is around the next turn.  
A forlorn mutt sits in the yard  
Waiting for someone to come home.  
I can see the TV is on in the living room,  
Canned laughter in the empty house  
Like the sound of beer cans tied to a hearse.*

I'm going to read that again, because I find I often can't concentrate on a poem the first time I hear it.

It is hard sometimes to stop looking - to the sky, in an empty bedroom; It is hard sometimes to stop looking - to still your tail from hopeful wagging or stop your fist from angry shaking.

The disciples stood and stared into the clouds, what confusion they must have felt. Jesus has done this before. They don't know what to think. Will he be at the house when they get back? Will the women come running in again reporting that they had seen him? Like moviegoers when the lights come up and the credits roll, it is the end. They stand there trying to adjust their eyes. Christ knew that confusion would reign in the wake of his ascension so he sent two messengers to clear their eyes, to draw their gaze back to earth. Is this the end?

Those who know the story of Jesus' life, but not the story of Christ might think that this is the end. It is, for sure, the last encounter with the enfleshed Christ - three of the four gospels end with an account of his going away. They end with it, like a movie or a novel would.

And yet, the text we heard today, the text from Acts with the disciples staring at the clouds is the first chapter of Acts - an odd place to put an ending. The disciples certainly don't think it's the end. They have been waiting for the Kingdom of Israel to be restored to its former glory - and now, they think, must be the time. They badger him with questions about what's going to happen next, he silences them a bit harshly - it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has set. "Aw. Gee." They were so looking forward to being on top for a change. But, Jesus will not leave them like this. He makes this promise - you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes. There is work to be done and the Holy Spirit, my Spirit, will be with you as you do it. This is not the end.

And then, Jesus is lifted up and disappears into the clouds. Who could blame them for standing and staring heavenward. They haven't even had time to turn to one another and puzzle this out when Jesus' messengers nudge them back to earth; when Jesus' messengers remind them that Jesus will come again. That they don't need to stand there gazing upwards.

This moment, these few seconds, maybe minutes, when the disciples' focus is brought back to earth is one of the most important in our story, but we don't spend a lot of time on it. Many preachers will avoid it altogether giving next Sunday's Pentecost pride of place. But this moment, when the disciples return to Jerusalem with the Promise Jesus has made still in their ears --You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes - - This moment between Jesus' departure and the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the disciples live in the promise - no longer gazing toward the heavens, but they are still watching and waiting. They are still a community ready for whatever happens to happen to them as a community.

On Pentecost, next Sunday, the Holy Spirit arrives in 'tongues of fire' and other bells and whistles. But it is on Ascension Day when the disciples believed Christ's promise.

We too live in that promise; we too are gathered here using the power of the Holy Spirit to witness to God's goodness; to fuel us for service; to accompany us in tribulation; to stand with us when we cannot help ourselves from staring at the clouds and looking for the lost, the missing, the missed; to console us when we've stopped looking and try to live this new life marked by loss.

It is hard to stop looking up into the clouds sometimes. Looking for what we've lost, looking for what we need, looking in wonder at the colorful beauty - making a balloon bouquet seem drab; looking, with a full heart, in remembrance, "why is the sky blue, Daddy?" It is hard to stop looking, to not think we've seen a glimpse of Christ's toe, when actually what we've seen, felt, rested on and wrestled with is the Promise - "and remember I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Gaze at the clouds if you need to, looking for what you've lost, and remember who is looking with you.