

Children

Imagine a situation in which they are falsely accused of doing something wrong or making a mistake. (Perhaps their parents come home and find that an expensive vase has been broken.) Ask them also to imagine that someone else has seen exactly what really happened. (Their brother or sister, for instance, has seen the dog knock the vase off the table with its tail.) Now ask them if they would want the witness to speak up - or lie about what really happened? Remind your class that people accuse Jesus falsely every day when they say that he has deserted them or never really existed. Remind them that they are the witnesses who must speak up and defend Jesus.

I

These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

In some of the rural communities of our countries, ministers and their congregations take this passage literally. As a test of faith some will plunge their hands into a box of rattlesnakes, pull one out and hold it in front of the congregation. Others will drink strychnine poison. Some will survive. Some will be bitten by the rattlers. Some will die from the poison. Now these simple rural communities view the survivors as positive examples of the faith of the entire community. They view those who are bit by the snakes or who die from the poison as examples of the weakness of the community's faith.

They are incorrect in interpreting Jesus' words literally. He doesn't want us to challenge him to heal us, nor does he want us to put ourselves in unnecessary peril. But they are correct in recognizing that faith in Jesus gives them the ability to conquer the evils of the world. And their communities are right when they credit success to the Lord and see failure as a result of their lack of faith.

But, first, let me say a word about literal interpretations of the Bible. This form of fundamentalism demands that every word, every statement be believed exactly as it is written and read. For example, the fundamentalists would say that the world was created some 40,000 years ago because that is the date they best determine from Genesis. If you show them a fossil they would say that it is fake. They get so bogged down in the details that they miss the point of the message: God is the Creator. Here is a little story that I think would help you understand better what is wrong with the fundamental approach to the Bible. A young Mom takes her five-year-old son to the beach. The Mom keeps an eye on the little one playing in the water, when suddenly the child calls out, "Shark, Shark!" The Mom runs into the water to protect the child, and the child just starts laughing. "This is not funny," the Mom says, "I need to impress upon you that it is wrong to call for help when you don't need it." So she tells the child the story of the boy who called wolf. You remember, the boy was a shepherd and became bored. He called wolf to get the attention of the townsfolk. Then he laughed when they came running, all concerned. He did this twice. The people came both times, but were furious that he was playing a bad joke. Then the boy really did see a wolf. He called for

help again, only this time no one responded, and he and the flock were attacked. Now, the Mom tells this story to the five-year-old to impress upon him the importance of only calling for help when it is needed. That is the point of the story. Anything particular about the shepherd, or whether he was tending sheep or goat, or where he lived or when he lived or even if it was a boy or girl, none of this is important. All that is important is the message of the story: Don't call for help when you don't need it. To get bogged down in the incidentals is to miss the purpose of the message.

What was the message that Jesus was giving when he mentioned the signs of those who believed? The message was that they could fight and conquer evil in its worst forms. Jesus used snakes to represent the devil. His followers, those who believe in him, can take on and beat off the devil. He used poison to represent the evil of the world, not just a poisonous potion, but the poison that is hatred, the poison that is materialism, prejudice, the drug culture, the sex culture, polarization, seeing all who disagree with us as enemies, and on and on. Jesus said that his followers would be able to take on the poison of the world and defeat it.

Then he ascended into heaven. Peter and the boys didn't grieve that he was gone. Mary Magdalene and the girls didn't resume their crying. No, they were too busy. Instead they got to work and proclaimed the wonders and the beauties of Jesus's life. The devil went after them and all who followed them in full battle array. He convinced others to torture them and expel them from their communities and friends. He talked some into killing them, but the devil didn't win. He couldn't stop the work of the Kingdom of God. They beat off the snake. All the evil of the world went to war against Jesus' followers. The poisons that destroy the soul, that destroy life attacked them. The Christians didn't go into hiding. They took on the poison of the world and found a life free of evil, a life of meaning, the Christian life.

Jesus ascends to heaven and then says to us: "Get to work. Fight off the snake, the devil. Fight off poisons of the world. You can win these victories. You can win them because I really haven't left you. I am with you. My spirit, the Holy Spirit, strengthens you.

We all have poisons that we have to fight off in our lives. We all have our own demons. Some are of our own making. Some are imposed upon us by others or by situations beyond our control. One person wages a continual battle against alcohol. Another against drugs. One is fighting to be in Christian relationships with others. One must deal with the fact that her family is not what it should be. Another is suffering the terror of abuse. One has physical challenges another has psychological challenges. All of us are fighting selfishness. These and so many other demons and poisons of the world attack us, but they can't beat us down. We will win against the evil of the world because we have the greatest weapon there ever was. We possess Jesus Christ.

Jesus ascends into heaven and assumes his place as Lord of heaven and earth. What does that mean, "Lord"? It means that he has the power to win, to beat off

evil. It means that he is in control. He is our Lord. He is the one who fights for us and with us.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, his followers went on offense. They didn't cower in a room, afraid of what the enemies of God's kingdom would do to them. Instead, they took the battle to the devil. The gospel puts this so simply: *They went forth and preached everywhere,*" People who would seldom leave their villages, traveled the world to wage the battle of the Kingdom. They preached everywhere. That's what we are all called to do. We are called to take the battle to the enemy. We are called to combat moral evil wherever it exists, within us and around us. We are called give people the Gospel, the good News. The Good News is this: there is a much better life than the one the world paints as ideal. There is a life where every action has meaning. There is a life of fulfillment. This life is the life of the Lord. That's the Good News. Life is infinitely better when it is lived united to Jesus Christ.

Snakes will attack. Poison will be forced down our throats. But we, the people of the Ascended Lord will beat it all off. How? Well, the gospel explains how in its last words: *the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word.*

We don't wage this war alone. We fight with the might of the Lord Jesus Christ. And with him on our side, how can we possibly lose?

II

Prove the world is round

There are many things we believe in this world that we haven't seen. As children we learned that the earth is round. We've never traveled into space and looked back at the earth but we believe what we have been taught.

It was the ancient Greeks who first theorized that the earth is round. This discovery is attributed to Pythagoras who first proposed it sometime around 500 B.C. "Earth is a sphere floating in space," he declared to a packed lecture hall.

It is said that a grave silence fell upon the hall when he said this. His listeners were amazed. They wondered how they could live on a sphere! Common sense suggested that earlier philosophers were right when they said the earth was a flat disc floating on the air. Pythagoras had deduced the idea of a round earth based on his observation that earth casts a circular shadow on the moon during eclipses. (1)

His revolutionary idea was accepted by Aristotle and other Greek philosophers and became common knowledge as early as 300 B.C. Most of the rest of humanity, though, had to accept it on faith. It has only been within our own lifetime that human beings have escaped the earth's magnetic field and ventured out into space and affirmed that Pythagoras was right. The world is round.

Of course, there are still some people who belong to the Flat Earth Society. They believe from their own limited experience that the idea that the earth is a sphere is preposterous. Of course, some people still contend that humans have not landed on the moon. That it was all a government hoax. I have no idea what to do with such folks, but most of us have accepted the truths of science from an early age. We believe even though we have not seen.

Scientists tell us that life began to emerge on earth as early as 3.5 billion years ago. That is amazing. They also tell us that our earth is rotating on its axis at 1100 miles per hour; that our earth is rotating around the sun at 481,000 mph; and that our sun and solar system are whirling into space at 57,000,000 mph. Wow! It would take quite a leap of faith to believe all that, but people I know and trust tell me it's true, and thus I believe that, yes, it is all likely true.

Furthermore, they tell us this universe is enormous. Now this isn't mere conjecture. For four decades two Voyager space crafts have been hurtling beyond the edge of our solar system at a rate of 100,000 miles per hour. These space craft have been speeding away from earth and are now approximately 12 billion miles from this small planet. When these craft were still responding to signals at about 9 billion miles away engineers would beam commands to them at the speed of light. It took these commands thirteen hours to arrive, even at the speed of light! It is estimated that to send a message to the edge of our enormous universe at the speed of light would take 15 billion years. And within this enormous universe there are billions and billions of galaxies. (2)

That's more than I can get my mind around, but isn't it a magnificent thought that we live in such an amazing universe? Is there anyone in this room who believes that such a magnificent universe could just have happened with no guiding hand at work? Are you mad?

British astrophysicist Fred Hoyle compares the likelihood of life appearing on earth by accident as equivalent to the possibility that a tornado sweeping through a junkyard might assemble a Boeing 747 from the materials found there. (3) An accident? I don't think so.

There is a story about a caveman who was out hunting one day and found a modern-day watch. He noticed this strange looking object on the ground making a ticking sound. Looking at the face of the watch, he saw the hands go around. Opening the inside, he saw a system with order. At that time, he didn't know what it was but he said, "If this is a watch, there must be a watchmaker."

And that is the way most of us respond to this amazing universe. Without a watchmaker, there could be no watch. And without Supreme Intelligence, there could be no universe. There is no way this world with all its immensity and intricacy and beauty could simply have happened. Even a caveman could see that.

Do you remember Thornton Wilder's classic play *Our Town*? There is a scene in it where Jane Crofut gets a letter from her minister when she is sick. The envelope is addressed like this: "Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God."

That's right the mind of God. That is where it all began. Science can tell us how it happened, but only faith can tell us why it happened.

A father told of taking his family to the Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado. He said the sky seemed more brilliant than they had ever seen it, and the stars were so close you felt as if you could touch them.

Their three boys decided that they would put their sleeping bags out on the ground so they could go to sleep watching the stars. The man and his wife had just settled down for the night when their youngest boy came into the tent, dragging his sleeping bag with him.

"What is the matter?" his parents asked. "Is it getting too cold?"

"No," he answered. Then he added, "I just never knew I was so small." (4)

Well, it does make us feel small. But it also reminds us of how great and wonderful God is. Even if you were determined to be an agnostic, you would still be left with mysteries that science cannot answer: The first of these is the creation of the universe itself: that there should be something rather than nothing is miraculous. The second is that, once upon a time, some of the inanimate matter on this earth planet suddenly came to life. And the third is that some of that matter that came to life gained the ability to think, to be motivated, to seek, and to imagine, even to hope. (5)

Even if you weren't impressed by the immensity and the intricacy of it all, the wondrous beauty of creation alone should show the sheer lunacy of believing it all happened by pure chance. "Nature," wrote Jonathan Edwards, "is God's greatest evangelist." And he was right.

So why couldn't they see? Why couldn't the friends and neighbors of Elliot Rodgers in Isla Vista see what was going on inside his head? Why couldn't his parents see beyond their own frustration? Why couldn't he see beyond his own needs and insecurities? Why could he not see the lives of those he would kill? The father of one victim asks "why can't our nation see what guns are doing to us?" Professionals ask why we can't help those who so obviously need it. There is, I think, one kind of seeing that happens instinctually. It's mostly passive. Our eyes take things in, we may note one or another thing, and then we move on to something else. Almost all the seeing we do this way. When something happens later, or someone points something out, we knock ourselves in the head wondering why we didn't notice it at first.

But another kind of see is not passive; it's active, engaged, searching, and deep. We have this striking phrase in the second reading today, from Ephesians: "the eyes of our hearts." This is the scriptures' way of talking about the deeper seeing we need when dealing with God. Look at so many more people who think they are atheists today. We want to ask them: are you even looking? Looking in the right place? Looking with open eyes?

But we ourselves can be like the disciples of Jesus who, with passive eyes, are staring at Jesus ascending into heaven. We can imagine this is all about outer space, and strange worlds, and the bottom of Jesus' feet. "Men of Galilee," the angel has to say, "Why are you looking into the sky?" We cannot see the Ascension by staring. We've got to use the eyes of our hearts.

What do the eyes of our hearts see? Deeper, more clearly, more peacefully, with contemplation, in prayer: all that for sure. But also our more expansive hopes, not only for ourselves but for humankind. Also the deepest meanings and implications of our loves and our loving. And, most of all, how we cannot see without seeing things in God. “In your light, we see light,” says one of the Psalms; St. Augustine meditated on this phrase for most of his life—to see everything in God’s truth and love. What does God’s light show me?

Part of seeing in God involves not only living in God, but also acting in God. The angel tells the “men of Galilee” that Jesus will return—so they are to live in hope, acting from hope, not with small and crippled visions. But Jesus himself tells the disciples in Galilee, in this very famous passage from the end of Matthew’s Gospel, that they are live with the kind of hope that drives them forth, helping others see in God’s light, helping others find Jesus with the eyes of their heart, helping the world become his disciples.

The eyes of our hearts, when they look on Christ, bring us hope and bring us mission. The Word has gone out—not only to all the nations, but through twenty centuries, until we ourselves hear it. We are no different than the “men of Galilee”—we too are told to make the world disciples. But we can do that only by consciously accepting our discipleship, consciously looking with the eyes of our hearts, and consciously seeking to help the world see God, see God in Jesus, see God with his Spirit.

This doesn’t mean we go to Nigeria or Thailand. It means right in our own homes, our families, among our friends, in our own living environment. If our families, our children, our friends and associates, only see us looking passively, how does this help them to see with the eyes of the heart? If our faith is mostly a cultural form, and not an active way of life, how do others come to see in the light God asks us to shed and spread?

Jesus’ Ascension is not an absence; it’s a deeper presence, in the world and also in our hearts. He continues to return in our prayer, our worship, our daily deeds done in love, in our love for others, in the hopes that allow us to live with conviction and energy. Enough angry people with eyes filled with violence, enough of that. It’s time for clearer eyes, light-filled eyes, and love-filled hearts.

III

It is said that Americans are the most time-conscious people in the world. We are always in a hurry. We invented fast food, instant coffee, instant messenger, express mail, express oil changes and expressways. We are people constantly on the move. As one man put it, we're people who shout at our microwave ovens to hurry up.

I'm not going to ask you to hold up your hand if you enjoy waiting . . . for anything. That would hold up my sermon too much. And that would be a cardinal sin.

One lady wrote about her frustrations waiting in line. She wrote: "Here are the reasons I'd like to thank Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and my local grocer for having 25 checkout lanes and only three open at any given time . . .

"Waiting in long lines keeps my domestic brain from going completely idle there's so much to learn!

"I can catch up on my magazine reading without buying any.

"I have time to leave my cart in line and run back to get the 13 things on my list I forgot.

"I can be one of those annoying cell phone users and catch up on all my phone calls to my insurance agent, mother-in-law, and Auntie Anne.

"I can catch a quick catnap now rather than on the drive home.

"I can assess what other people have in their carts and get exciting new dinner ideas.

"I can finally apply my top coat of nail polish with plenty of drying time.

"I can run next door and pick up my dry cleaning.

"I can update my coupon organizer and leave the trash in the we-never-open-enough-checkout-lanes store instead of my purse.

"I can practice my standup comedy routines on unsuspecting fellow customers.

"I can practice some standing yoga poses and then do those isometric muscle-contracting exercises no one else in line is supposed to know you're doing.

"I can taste test my package of the newest low-carb, zero-transfat, Splenda-saturated cookies.

"I can breathe heavily on my T-bones so they're defrosted in time for dinner and I won't have to leave them out on the driveway in the hot late afternoon sun as I normally do." (1) Things to do while you're waiting in line. We've all been there, haven't we? Times when we've had to wait.

Dr. Stanley Sneeringer writes about the impatience we feel while waiting for an elevator to arrive. Manufacturers such as Otis Elevator have this down to a science. They know that a good waiting time for an elevator is in the neighborhood of 15 seconds, because at around 40 seconds people start to get visibly upset. "When they're waiting for an elevator, as well as when they're in an elevator, they don't really feel

they can do much productive,” says one executive at Otis. Once on board, elevator antsiness only intensifies while waiting for the door to close.

Dr. Sneeringer asks, “How long do you think you generally have to wait? Twenty seconds? Ten seconds? Five seconds? Two seconds?

“[The] answer: only two to four seconds, which doesn’t sound like much, but feels for some of us like a very long time. And not just if we’re anxious Americans. ‘If you travel in Asia at all,’ observes [this same executive], ‘you will notice that the CLOSE DOOR button in elevators is the one with the paint worn off. It gets used more than any other button in the elevator.’ Asians can’t wait for that door to close so they can be on their way.

Ironically, notes Dr. Sneeringer, the CLOSE DOOR button is often disabled by building managers for liability reasons. People keep pushing the button and it doesn’t even work. It is a dummy, a piece of exercise equipment for anxious fingers.” (2)

The point is that few of us enjoy waiting: in an elevator, in a long shopping line, in the doctor’s office or wherever we happen to be.

One woman tells about arriving 20 minutes early for her son’s one o’clock appointment with the doctor. She watched patient after patient disappear into the various rooms. When she was still sitting in the waiting room 1 1/2 hours later, she’d had enough and had become pretty irate. Fortunately, as she got up and went to the receptionist, she calmed down enough to handle it without anger.

When she arrived at the desk she said calmly, “I know my son’s appointment was for one o’clock. Can you tell me if that was a.m. or p.m.?” (3)

What a great way to express your frustration. I wish I could come up with witty lines like that when I’m frustrated. And yet, waiting is a part of life.

Here is something that you need to know: waiting plays a big role in the Bible. Think about it. Biblical characters spent a considerable part of their lives waiting.

Noah waited 120 years until it began to rain.

Abraham waited until he was 99 years old before his promised son Isaac was born.

The children of Israel waited in slavery for 400 years before God sent Moses to deliver them.

God told Moses he would lead his people out of slavery, but then made him wait in the desert 40 years before he was allowed to do anything about it.

Joseph, unjustly accused, spent 14 years in prison. Then God elevated him to second-in-command in Egypt.

God had David anointed as king, but then David waited for years until the death of Saul before he actually ascended to the throne.

Job waited a lifetime, 60-70 years, before he was vindicated.
Even Jesus waited for 30 years before he started his ministry.
Waiting was a part of life for the heroes of the Bible, just as it is part of life for us.

In today's lesson from the book of Acts, Jesus gives his disciples a difficult assignment. He tells them to wait. It was just before Christ's ascension into heaven. Listen to these important words: "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating

with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised . . ."

Don't you think that is interesting? Before they did anything else, they were to wait. It's a little bit ironic. The Book of Acts is sometimes called, "The Acts of the Apostles." It is a record of their activities the many things they did. But here in the first chapter of the book Christ is telling them to do nothing. First, they are to wait. But what is it for which they are waiting?

They are awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit. "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." Then a few verses later he says to them: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

This is the last thing Christ says to them before he leaves this earth. Actually there are basically two commands that Christ gives them in this passage. The first is to wait for the gift of the Spirit and the second is that they are to be his witnesses. These two commands are sequential: wait and then witness. Why do I say they are sequential? It is the Holy Spirit that gives us the power we need to bear witness to our faith. No waiting no witness, at least no effective witness. I suspect this is why many of us are so feeble in our witness to faith. We are not spending enough time waiting.

Many of us grew up loving the King James Version translation of Isaiah 40:31: "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

Waiting precedes witnessing. The Holy Spirit gives us power for this demanding task.

I like the way one unknown author describes the work of the Spirit. He uses the analogy of a common source of power, gasoline. He says that the power of gasoline can be experienced in two different ways. It can be unleashed, or it can be harnessed.

Suppose I were to drop a lighted match in a ten gallon barrel of gasoline. What will happen at that point? I would probably die. Ten gallons of gas can produce quite an explosion.

On the other hand, suppose I were to pour that ten gallons of gas into the gas tank of my car. Then, depending on the fuel efficiency of my car, I might be able to drive hundreds of miles. Dropping a lighted match into a barrel of gasoline might produce a spectacular effect, but a controlled burn will take me a lot further in life.

The Holy Spirit is the fuel in the Christian's tank to help us to be all that Christ has called us to be. We wait on the gift of the Holy Spirit, then we seek to live for Christ. If we want to mount up with wings as eagles, we must first wait upon the Lord. We must pray for Christ's Holy Spirit within us.

There was once a German Lutheran missionary to Sumatra named Ludwig Nommensen. Ludwig has been described as one of the most successful missionaries ever to preach the gospel.

Ludwig went to work with a tribe in a remote area of Sumatra. The village chief welcomed him. He said, "You have 2 years to learn our customs and convince us you have a message worth hearing." The chief wanted Ludwig to explain how Christianity differs from the morality and the traditions the tribe already had. "We already know what is right," the chief explained. "We too have laws that say we must not steal, or take our neighbor's wives, or tell lies."

Ludwig replied, "That's true. But my God supplies the power needed to keep those laws."

This startled the chief. "Can you really teach my people to live better?"

"No, I can't," responded Ludwig. "But if they receive Jesus Christ, God will give them the strength to do what is right."

The chief invited him to stay another 6 months, during which Ludwig preached the gospel and taught villagers how the Holy Spirit works in the lives of Christians. "You can stay as long as you want," the chief finally announced. "Your God walks with [people] and gives them strength to do the things He requires." (4)

Many Christian believers have never grasped this principle. The Christ life can never be lived apart from the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. We need to spend time waiting, as well as witnessing. We need to pray that God will give us His Spirit to live within us that we might be empowered to be all that He has called us to be.

This feast of the Ascension is not so much about Jesus' departure but rather the new empowerment that happens when Jesus, raised from the dead, is associated with his Father in the transformation of the world. For Jesus ascends in power to bestow power upon his followers. Jesus vanishes from our midst in one kind of presence in order for us to be empowered by the Holy Spirit he sends upon us.

The angels make this point in almost a comical way to the Apostles. They stand, staring up into the sky, looking at Jesus as his body vanishes. "Men of Galilee," they say, "Why are you looking into the heavens?" This is just like the angels message to the women on Easter morning: Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is raised. Now we can live in his resurrection. He does the same thing to the disciples on their way to Emmaus: once they recognize him, he vanishes from their sight. The point is not his risen Body, as essential as his resurrection is. The point is that we are now empowered to live his life and continue his ministry.

This is what the Holy Spirit accomplishes in us: our prayer, our service, our care for each other, our witness to Jesus in our lives, our inviting, our sharing—all of this is the power of Jesus given to us through the Holy Spirit. Jesus wants no pity-parties. He wants no extended grieving. He does not need us to cling onto his body. Rather, filled with the same power of God by which

Jesus was raised from the dead, he wants us to live risen lives, to live Easter and be Easter in the world today.

Then and only then can we experience the wisdom of the words of Isaiah: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”

1. Sermon Fodder, <http://www.sermonfodder.com/>.
2. <http://www.faithlutheranchurch.org/00sermons/07-23-00.htm> 3. Clean Laffs, <http://www.gophercentral.com/sub/sub-jokes.html>.
4. Davon Huss, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/scripture/illustrations-on-romans-715-725.asp?passage=romans%207:15-7:25>.