“Why Do You Stand Looking?”
Acts 1:6-14

We were sitting on the Mount of Olives a few years ago, looking across the graveyard that is now the Kidron Valley leading to the city of Jerusalem. We were mostly a Wilshire group, but Rabbi Nancy Kasten and I were leading. Our Jewish guide was a wonderful spirit and deeply learned about Judaism and the Holy Land. We had been talking about how the Mount of Olives was the place where the prophet Zechariah said the messiah would lead the final battle for Jerusalem and the restoration of Israel. I began to talk about the ascension story of Jesus that also took place there, as we just read from the Book of Acts.

Since we had become close enough to trust one another, he privately made the painful comment that from his point of view that Christianity was basically built on a mistake about Jesus. We call him the messiah of Israel, but he didn’t do what the messiah was supposed to do—restore the kingdom to Israel.

And that’s the very question the disciples ask Jesus just before he ascends to heaven. Jesus doesn’t answer them directly. Typical of him, don’t you know?! He tells them it’s not for them to know the times or the seasons that God has set by God’s own authority. Instead, he redirects them. He tells them they are to wait to receive the power of the coming Holy Spirit and then they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Then he is lifted up into a cloud—which symbolizes the mystery of the divine presence—and he is taken away from their sight.

This begins the story of the passing of the mantle from Jesus to the church. But before we get there, it might help us to return to the question of whether they were wrong—and whether we are wrong—about Jesus. I want to answer that in a way that might surprise you. Yes, and no.

So much of the painful history of Christianity’s relationship to Judaism is based on our difference over the one we have in common. Jesus was a Jew and nothing else. He was never a
Christian per se. That may seem obvious, but it doesn’t go without saying. It’s true that Jesus did not fulfill the expectations of Israel that the messiah would restore the kingdom to the covenant people. But it’s also true that the mission of Israel was not meant to end with Israel’s restoration to self-government in Jerusalem. Israel was always meant to be a witness to God for the sake of the whole world. And the people of Israel—including Jews today, whether in the State of Israel or anywhere in the world, continue to serve the purposes of God that the dream of God for all humanity become a reality on earth as it is in heaven.

Christians, those who are now heirs of the disciples by faith, continue that mission alongside Jews, not as a substitute for them or a replacement of them. That we play a part in God’s work in the world does not end the unique role of Jews in reminding the world that it is not there yet. God still has work to do through us; and while we do it from different faith perspectives, we are doing it side by side.

Sometimes we make surprising discoveries while looking for something else. Like, for instance, Sir Alexander Fleming, a Scottish researcher, who 92 years ago was looking for a flu vaccine in a London lab. He accidentally stumbled upon the discovery of penicillin.

Fleming was working with staphylococcus colonies on a culture plate when he went on a two-week vacation. When he returned, he realized he had absent-mindedly left them out in the lab. Lo and behold, he found when he returned that a mold had developed on them that marked a bacterial inhibitor of many common pathogenic bacteria. Said Fleming: One sometimes finds what one is not looking for. When I woke up just after dawn on Sept. 28, 1928, I certainly didn’t plan to revolutionize all medicine by discovering the world’s first antibiotic, or bacteria killer. But I guess that was exactly what I did.

Wouldn’t it be something in these days of searching for a

1 https://www.healio.com/endocrinology/news/print/endocrine-today/%7B15afd2a1-2084-4ca6-a4e6-
COVID-19 vaccine if we were to stumble onto something as transformational as that! I think we’d all settle, in this case, for the thing we’re looking for.

But I wonder if this is not what we should take away from the ascension of Jesus on the Mount of Olives. The disciples were looking for one thing and found another. They were looking for Jesus to be the answer to Israel’s question. And what they found was that they were to become part of the answer themselves.

Behind this story of Jesus going up into the cloud is the story of Elijah going up into the cloud in the chariot of fire. Elijah’s prophetic mentee, Elisha, was left behind to pick up his master’s mantle—literally and figuratively. He put it on and crossed the Jordan to begin his own ministry as Elijah’s successor. Jews continue to this day to leave the door open and an empty seat at the Passover table for Elijah’s return, which now is viewed more spiritually as a way of keeping alive the vision of a messianic age of global peace and justice.

When Jesus is taken up into the cloud, the disciples are left looking to heaven. The angels—maybe the same ones who had appeared at the empty tomb asking them why they were looking for the living among the dead—again appear to ask them why they stand there looking up into heaven?

I had a lovely email exchange this week with a Parkland Hospital chaplain, Stacey Merlin. She had become a monthly donor to Faith Commons, the interfaith organization I formed two years ago that many of you know of. Rabbi Nancy Kasten and I work together with other faith leaders, like Imam Omar Suleiman, to bear witness to God’s dream of a more just and equitable world. When I thanked her for her support, she told me about her work with COVID-19 healthcare workers right now. She’s a member of Temple Emanu-El. And then she said this: There is a Jewish saying that says we should try to bring heaven down to earth .... I truly believe that God IS Love and that we are meant to treat each other as one human family regardless of our expression of faith or who we call God.

The whole story of the Book of Acts is just that: bringing heaven down to earth. The mantle has been passed from Jesus to his
followers, the church. Jesus has crossed the barrier between heaven and earth. And he has sent the Spirit to empower us to continue his boundary-crossing work on earth. The rest of the Book of Acts is about the church breaking down every barrier between God and people. The barriers between Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, clean and unclean. The church isn't just called to go into Jerusalem, so to speak. It is called to go into Jerusalem and through it. We are to take Jerusalem to Judea and to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. We are called to announce God’s reign through Israel—not just to Israel and certainly not without Israel. We are called to include EVERY BODY, as we like to say here at Wilshire.

When the angels tell the disciples not to stand looking, they are really telling them to get moving. Heaven’s got their back. Now go to the ends of the earth. You don’t need to concern yourself with Jesus exactly; he’s safely at the right hand of God, actively working behind the veil. You are to concern yourself with Jesus’ mission, the one he gave you here. The one he gave us.

We gave a nice gift this week to Bonton Farms from the estate of Bill O’Brien. He was especially passionate about that project. You may have seen the story on the front page of the Dallas Morning News this week. The urban farm started by Daron Babcock in the Bonton neighborhood is a sign of the reign of God.

Bonton is one of those parts of Dallas that had been redlined by deliberate intention during the years of segregation. Redlining was a practice where governments drew lines on a map around African American neighborhoods, telling mortgage bankers that those were not areas they should lend to. As a result, these black families were effectively ghettoized from white neighborhoods, and they were unconstitutionally kept from participating in the full life of Dallas. The name Bonton is actually a contraction of Bomb Town. It was called that because of the frequent bombings of that black neighborhood by whites that kept them in terror.

Daron Babcock learned about their plight and his Christian compassion moved him to act. He moved into the neighborhood and started an urban farm where the neighborhood could work
and get fresh produce. It has transformed the hopes of those who live there. But COVID-19 is putting the whole enterprise in jeopardy. The coronavirus is disproportionately hurting the black community in Dallas. And if you overlay the redlining map of 1937 with those same neighborhoods today and look at the infection rates, you will see that these are some of the hardest hit areas.

They aren’t sure if they will survive. So, we helped. And we will help. Heather is in touch with Daron and we are going to explore ways to work together after this plague lifts, assuming they survive.

Why do you stand looking into heaven? the angels say. You have work to do here on earth. Bringing heaven to earth. And from that day to this, that is still the church’s mission. Amen.