

FORWARD, MARCH!
Rev. Lawrence Baldrige
May 24, 2009

Whenever I read the first chapter of the book of Acts, I am struck by the word of the two angels to disciples of Jesus: “Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing into heaven, this same Jesus which is taken from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.” Actually, I think this verse can serve as a centerpiece for the entire chapter. It does matter where you’re looking, for you can only go where you are looking. That is why God put the two eyes in front of our head and not in back. We are to go forward.

This is Memorial Day Sunday, and I always think of our troops on this weekend. There is an argument that Yale University should reinstate the ROTC program, and I agree. I remember one of our Knott County students who was at the University of Kentucky when I was at Caney Cottage getting a degree in English. This young man was not a Caney Cottage student, but was from a family that could afford to send him there. He enjoyed being around the Caney Cottage guys, since they too were mountain boys. He was a proud member of the University of Kentucky ROTC program. He told this story on himself that had actually happened. Having been asked to march the ROTC platoon for the first time, this young soldier had forgotten the order to turn them around. He had them marching in a straight line toward the wall that was elevated about two feet above the narrow sidewalk that ran parallel to the very busy Limestone Street. The platoon was headed straight for that wall and for Limestone Street. Since he had forgotten the order to turn them around, my friend, the new Platoon Leader was experiencing a great deal of anxiety leading to panic. So, with all his might he cried out, “Come from the wall, come!” The platoon obviously followed his orders.

We are to look forward, and we are to march forward in the right direction.

Luke is writing a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. In Luke the author wrote to Theophilus, perhaps a slave owner who had given Luke his freedom, and who was converted to Christianity, although the name means ‘lover of God’ and could be a pseudonym for one who would read this. Certainly Luke is writing to the cultured Greeks trying to get them converted to the faith. The difference in the two books is the difference between the past and the eternal future. In the Book of Luke the author wrote of what Christ had done. In The Book of Acts Luke wrote of what Jesus had begun which would have no end. The Book of Acts is the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ.

Before we get to the message of the angels, however, we find that the disciples were first of all, GAZING BACKWARDS! We find them asking Jesus a question that they had talked about many times: ^{AC 1:6} So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Jesus was risen! He was alive! What would be His active role? Oblivious to what man could do to Him since death could not do Him in, would Jesus now do what

they had expected him to do even from the first time they started following Him? Would He assert His absolute authority, and bring the kingdoms of this world into complete submission to Himself? Would He bring judgment upon all the evil governments of the world, and especially upon Rome, the great whore Babylon, the throne of the anti-Christ? Would He cast them into the sea of hell with the hypocrite leaders of Israel? Jesus said, “No!”

The problem with the disciples was their backward look. Jesus had told them that a man who put his hand to the plow should not look back, but they were doing just that. They were engaged in the same insanity that afflicts us all, looking back to the ‘good old days.’ They preferred David on a White Charger to the Son of Man riding a donkey. They wanted to see the golden age, the golden rulers and the golden city more than they wanted to walk upon the streets of gold. From a political standpoint, they were on the winning side and wanted to enjoy the spoils that went with victory. But Jesus said, “No!” They were simply mirroring the dream of every good patriotic person of that day—they wanted freedom from their military oppressors. But Jesus had something better in store for them, real victory!

In one of his sermons, James Stewart tells of the Civil War battle in America when General Sherman rode into the middle of his retreating and beaten troops, stood in his stirrup, swished his flashing sword high in the sun, and cried out, “Men, you’re going in the wrong direction.” Then he single-handedly charged the enemy, and his soldiers followed and won a decisive battle for the Union Forces. The disciples were looking in the wrong direction. They were looking at the past glories that were no more, hoping to restore the glory of them. They failed to see that past glories were not as glorious as they imagined, and that the past cannot be revived. We may long for “the glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome” but we cannot bring them back.

Did you ever wonder why old men and women talk so much about the past? They do so because they think there is not much future left. Yesterday’s Herald Leader told of the Florida man, 98 years old, who got a hole-in-one in golf. In the article he said he hated golf, but it gave him the benefit of exercise. Regarding the hole-in-one, he said it was a thrill. Then he said, “it’s also a thrill for me, at my age, to wake up each morning.” I believe that older people would be better served to look to the future and not to glorify the somewhat glorious, or perhaps, even, inglorious past. Maybe we should take Thoreau’s advice and suck all the nectar out of the present moment, and then, bravely look forward to the future.

When they asked Him if He was going to restore the sovereignty of Israel and restore the reign of David, Jesus gave His little church this answer: ^{AC 1:7} He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ 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.”

Jesus was reminding His church not to gaze at the PAST, AND NOT TO GAZE WITHIN. Surely we will look within, but not gaze within, not be so introspective that we

forget about the outward reality of compassion for the human race. Jesus gave them a great command. But how could they do what Jesus commanded. They appreciated what Jesus promised, even if they didn't know what it was. But they mostly heard the other part of that statement, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That statement set them into introspection of the deepest kind. They had tried to be His witnesses. They had sworn to be loyal to Him even if it meant their own death. Peter had trumpeted his boastful words and the other apostles had no doubt said a loud, "Amen" to his sentiments. However, when the lion of Rome growled and bared its teeth, they ran like scared children, every one of them except John and the women. In their love to Jesus the others were not fully loyal. Above all, Peter denied Him three times. He didn't love Him enough, however, to be totally loyal to Him so he had to confess Jesus three times.

How then could they do what Jesus said and be His witnesses even in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the world, even if that would be easier than to be His witnesses in Jerusalem where their Leader had been murdered, and where, probably, a price was on their own heads.

They looked inside and they saw only weakness, only deflection, only sin. The task was impossible. But "with God all things are possible."

Of course I am assuming that such a sweeping statement of Jesus, an impossible statement, must have caused them to see their weak sinful human selves. I know how weak I am. When I look within I see weakness, sorrow, sin, and at times, helplessness and hopelessness. But thank God, it doesn't last long. For I realize that the sin of gazing within, of focusing on my sin and weakness, is a more terrible sin than all the wrong things I can do. Therefore I turn to the brighter side of life, the side of love and laughter and friendship and fellowship. When I lift myself above my self I find myself. Useless gazing upon my defects makes me weaker and makes my defects stronger. It is said that in the early centuries the saints would gaze upon their navels for hours at a time in their mystical pursuits. When one gazes only at his navel, the entire world, indeed the entire universe becomes a navel to him. I am reminded of the inebriated man who while unconscious had limburger cheese rubbed into his mustache by some mischievous little boy. When he awoke he took one breath and said, "The whole world stinks." While we should look within, we must not gaze within and become morose and self-depreciating. Although it is indeed true that the closer we get to God the more we see how sinful we really are, it is unhealthy and un-Christian, and unspiritual to gaze upon our sin when we should be gazing upon our Savior. Salvation cannot come from our sinful lives, but salvation and inspiration and sanctification comes from 'looking unto Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith...'

And while we are looking unto Jesus, we must not be GAZING UPWARD to the departing Jesus. Listen to these words: ^{AC 1:9} After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ^{AC 1:10} They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same

Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." The disciples did not want Jesus to go, but notice He was Taken from them. God's purpose for Jesus in His Incarnate Being had been accomplished on earth. He had told His disciples that. Time after time He had reminded them that He must go away. He spoke often about His Hour not yet, and His Hour to come. He reminded them that while He was upon earth He must be about His Father's business.

The disciples craved His companionship. They longed to have Him present. They were simply His disciples and He was their Rabbi. They were His sheep and He was the Good Shepherd. Now, they were disturbed anew that their leader for three exciting and productive years was being 'taken' from them. They were gazing into heaven because they knew how much they would miss His presence and His comradeship. Perhaps they thought this was simply one more demonstration of His seemingly magical powers. The angel's words were sharp and wounding: Quit staring into heaven! The angel's words were reassuring: Jesus will come back in the same manner as you have seen Him go! They had the upward look, but they didn't need to stand and brood and gaze.

The upward look is essential to us all. I read a poem years ago that has since been meaningful and inspiring to me. I don't know who wrote it, but it goes like this: "Two men looked through prison bars:
One saw mud, the other stars."

The way we look at things is important, but again I remind you, God gave us eyes in the front of our heads and not on the top of our heads. We are to look forward, not upward, inward, or backward.

Paul wrote about the Thessalonians who had decided to quit work and to start watching for the coming of Jesus, which, they believed, would happen very soon. He advises the church that such people should not live off the work of others. He gives them an aphorism that we still use, "If they don't work they don't eat." Someone paraphrased Paul's admonition, "Don't give the loaf to loafers." Over the centuries many groups in the church have advocated the time that the 2nd coming would occur. And, they have quit their occupations and retreated to desolate places with their families only to find that they were wrong. Jesus Himself said that no one, including Himself, could know that. That was in the Father's Hands. If Jesus left it there, we too should leave it there!

We should 'work for the night is coming' as Jesus said. He abandoned His earthly incarnation for His ministry of Divine Intercession, and left His Church to continue for Him the Ministry of Incarnation. Not without Power, however, were they. He promised and did send to them and to us the Holy Comforter. That Power transforms us into Sons and Daughters of the Living God. The very word Christian describes us: we are Little Christs! We are to live in the world as Christ lived in the world. Our lives are to be Christ's extended life through every living Christian. He can only be physically in all the world if He is in all the world through some of His disciples. Turn your eyes upon

Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face, And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace. Not that! Turn your eyes upon Jesus, gaze upon Him
only, and Incarnate Him to the world that the light of His glory and grace can be seen by
all mankind. The Son of God left this world so that we could be Sons and Daughters of
God in all the world.

If we are not to gaze backward, inward, and upward, where then should be our
gaze? Obviously FORWARD. The words of our victorious commander are
FORWARD, MARCH! I want to show you two ways that they were looking forward—
in Prayer and in Planning. These are the two essential ingredients for all Christian
progress. ^{AC 1:12} Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives,
a Sabbath day's walk from the city. ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room
where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and
Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and
Judas son of James. ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the
women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

Prayer is the major component of all that the church does, yet, alas, fewer people
attend a prayer meeting than any other service of the church. I know that the time
restraints of people make it more difficult to pray, but all of us should take a few
moments out of every hour to pray. If prayer is as important as the Bible says it is, if God
commands us to pray, if God answers prayer, then we should pray. If we are to incarnate
Jesus in our lives, we must pray. He prayed more than anyone we read about in the
Bible. Those of us who met each week and prayed saw God's Hand at work in supplying
our needs for our new church building. While I would not minimize for a moment the
work done on the building, I would not hesitate for a moment to say that far more was
accomplished by prayer, both private and public prayer, than by all the labors of men.
The hammers and saws of prayer were the most effective hammers and saws that were
used on our new church building. But that is true of all our endeavors as Christians. The
Heavenly Father is in charge of this universe and of our lives. His will must first, before
all things, be found.

But then there is planning. Listen to these words of Scripture:

^{AC 1:20} "For," said Peter, "it is written in the book of Psalms, "
`May his place be deserted;
let there be no one to dwell in it,' and,
" `May another take his place of leadership.'

^{AC 1:21} Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the
whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from John's baptism to
the time when Jesus was taken up from us. ²⁶ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to
Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

The Bible does not tell us to forego planning. Rather it says that we must first
“wait upon the lord” which is another way of saying that we must first seek His will and

way and then plan ahead. Simon Peter believed that and acted accordingly. The Bible doesn't say we shouldn't think things through. It simply says we should not put our minds before the Mind of the Omnipotent God. That's what it means to "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not to thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths." To be effective Christians, to be an effective church we must pray and we must plan. Then we will assuredly not march toward a wall

Jesus said, "Forward, March!" Ours is not to know the reason why, but only to follow the orders of our Commander.