

Old Followers, New Leaders

*A sermon preached on Acts 1:1-11 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on May 13, 2018*

“If I didn’t follow the steps of the person in front of me, I thought I would fall off the face of the earth.”

My friend Carol said this to me as she recalled her ascent of Mount Kilimanjaro some eight years ago. Before she left, there were the training sessions to prepare for hours and hours of daily walking and the gear she amassed for this once-in-a-lifetime journey. When their group arrived, there were the introductions to the fearless porters who carried their stuff the whole way and the local guides who would lead them up the mountain – checking their vitals every night, watching them closely with care. And of course, there were the inevitable moments that every hiker had of looking up at the looming mountain from down below, thinking “how in the world will I be able to get to the top?!” followed by a rousing chorus of “Lead Me, Guide Me!” As they climbed, there were the bouts of altitude sickness that afflicted them all, and their guide’s reminder to his group of ambitious Americans who wanted to forge quickly to the top to ‘pole pole’ – slow down, slow down – that’s the only way to reach the roof of Africa!

And then there were the footsteps of the one in front of you. For you see, that final summit to the peak is the hardest and most harrowing trek of the entire climb. The group would go to bed around 8:00pm and awaken at midnight for the final leg of the journey. The path narrowed, the air thinned, the temperature dropped, the climb intensified, the mind focused, for all you could see from the limited light of your headlamp into the inky darkness

were the heels of the one in front of you. As people around you would falter and stop and with no way to orient you but up, of course you'd feel like one misstep and you'd fall off the mountain! But following those feet, still they traveled.

II.

I wonder if Jesus's disciples shared any of those emotions as they ascended the Mount of Olivet that day. For there were the years of dropping nets, leaving jobs, and stepping away from families to become his disciples. There were the months where their journeys around the countryside led to lives changed, where everyone from lepers to tax collectors to Temple busybodies to prostitutes had their worlds upended by him. There were the days — some 40, the gospel writer Luke tells us in his record of the early church we call the Book of Acts — after Jesus's resurrection where he shows up for them and with them, making himself known to them the way he always had: breaking bread, illuminating the scriptures, and joining them on the journey.

And then there was this day, when they gathered together after Jesus had asked them to wait and stay in Jerusalem. This was the day that would become the final ascent with him up the mountain. Perhaps sensing the occasion, one of the disciples asked Jesus: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Meaning — is this it, is this the summit, the climax, the peak to which all these thousands of steps have been leading? All those days of following in his steps — not knowing where they were leading or seeing where they were heading — is this the moment where it will

all be made final and the kingdom long-promised and desired would be Israel's?

Somehow I doubt any of them expected to see Jesus leave them as he did, rising up into the clouds as they stood gaping underneath.

III.

Our Lady of Walsingham Anglican Chapel in England isn't the only church with such a piece of artwork, but its peculiar "statue" depicting this moment of the ascension is memorable to say the least! Because when you stand before the altar in the St. Francis Chapel and look up into the ceiling, you will see the feet of Jesus looking back at you. His crucifixion scars are unmistakable, and just in case you needed the reminder that this was an otherworldly moment, there are gold beams emerging from his holy toes. It's a participatory piece of artwork, inviting the observer to stand in the same posture as did the disciples on that mountaintop centuries ago.¹

But as compelling as I'm sure the depiction is, I wonder if gazing at it too long might start to feel like ascending a mountain with only the heels of the person in front of you to guide you.

In that same spirit, perhaps we are like the disciples who, like those who approached the final summit of Kilimanjaro, simply watched Jesus's feet as they journeyed with him. We live our lives simply putting one foot in front of the next, often without stopping to consider where we're headed, or what our surroundings might be along the way. We're the kind who move throughout our days in a blur of tasks and routines, rising and readying and residing and returning: hour by hour, day by day, in and out of weeks as

¹ <https://www.walsinghamanglican.org.uk/photo-gallery/shrines-fifteen-chapels/#images-13>, with gratitude to dear friend Alan Sherouse for telling me about this piece of Ascension artwork.

months become years. The morning routine, the kids, the job, the needs, the workout, the meal, the appointments — each day, our eyes are down and our nose remains on the grindstone.

Or maybe we are like the disciples who long to know and see what this life of faithfulness all means. We want to jump to the end of the novel, climb quickly up the mountain, or figure out the catch or the climax. We're the kind who find ourselves perpetually looking to the next thing, the newest book or cleverest idea or freshest research that will reveal meaning that we haven't known before. When wrestling with a question or doubt, we are the ones who just want to holler out to the heavens, "just tell me already! What's the point? Who's got the right answer? Where is all of this going? What will the end look like?"

These are extreme descriptions of course, and many of us follow our pathways and vacillate between the two, depending on the circumstance. But I wonder if the invitation of Ascension Day, this day where we mark the moment when Jesus *leaves so that we might lead* in the earthly work of Love, is to shift our gaze, to refocus our eyes. The two men in white robes that Acts describes certainly offered that same invitation to the disciples: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?," they asked, implying heavily that there's more work to do than simply staying put and gazing at the holy Jesus. The ministry does not end just because Jesus is no longer here, they seem to say, but rather it has just begun.

So instead of only looking to things above — to the last things, the big things, the most heavenly things — or instead of looking to the feet of our leader and down to our own below — the daily, ordinary things, the regular,

everyday life of faith things – what if instead we looked around? “*You will be my witnesses,*” Jesus proclaims to his disciples in every age, “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth!”

Of course a life of faith must be lived with eyes cast up to the heavens and down to the earth. We must always keep our eyes trained on the One we follow lest we lose our way or even fall off a mountain! But a life of faith without looking **around** and looking to one another misses the grand call of discipleship *to bear witness* to God’s created world, to sisters and brothers of all kinds, in all ways, in all lands... bearing witness to what we have seen and experienced in Jesus Christ... bearing witness to transformation.

IV.

As the harrowing trek up the final steps of Kilimanjaro drew to a close, suddenly those footsteps that had led Carol’s way began to broaden and lighten somehow. For there at dawn, the sacred sunrise burst forth over the African horizon, blanketing their arrival to the peak with light and sight. And what are you to do on the top of a mountain but look around and give thanks to God?

The late pastor Peter Gomes reminds us, “We [Christians] are not permitted the luxury of gazing at Jesus’s feet. No, we must get on with Jesus’s work... We cannot remain on the mountaintop; we must go back into the cities and countryside to witness, wait, and work for glory.”²

Those who summit Kilimanjaro report that the average time at the top of the mountain is about six minutes. Six minutes after six days of hiking to

² Peter Gomes, *Sermons*, p96.

revel in the glory! But then it's time to come back down, to bear witness to what they saw and experienced.

The very next scene in Acts tells of the disciples descent off the mountain, how they came down from gazing at Jesus to guiding in Jerusalem. Having been sent forth, they then prayed diligently and organized their leadership for gospel ministry. For when these disciples were ready to lead and bear witness to Jesus, to proclaim the immeasurable greatness of him who is crowned and sits at the right hand of God, to preach and teach and heal and care in his name, to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly in the Way of Christ, to be about God's work of Love in the world — **that's** when the heavens broke open again and the Spirit poured forth its unbridled power at Pentecost. Thousands were saved, and a church was born.

Just imagine what might happen were we to prepare ourselves for leading the lives to which we have been called and bearing witness to Christ to all the ends of the earth? It might look as spectacular as that day of Pentecost or as ordinary as seeing one another as beloved of God. But I bet it would look like a sunrise bursting forth over the horizon, filling the world with all the fullness of the light of Christ! Look around!