

Acts 1:4-11 is the second account of Jesus’ lift-off into the sky; the first account came at the end of Luke’s gospel. Scholars are fairly certain that the same author wrote both Luke and Acts, so we can see as we look at this passage that Luke basically considers Acts a continuation of the story. The thing is, there are a few more details in the Acts story, details that give us a jumping off point to consider what we might learn from the experiences of the first disciples as they watched Jesus rise up into the wild, blue yonder.

It seems right for us to put ourselves in the disciples’ shoes. After all, we say we are disciples of Jesus, too, and although Lent and Easter season are still several months away, we have the opportunity to begin this year by following in the footprints Jesus’ first disciples who were left trying to imagine what it might be like to **focus** on something so incredibly profound.

By the time Jesus ascended to heaven, you would think that the disciples were beginning to figure things out. It’s as if Jesus the star athlete was back in the game now after a crippling injury. I also imagine the disciples were still recovering from the shock of his arrest, trial, and execution and were finally gaining a little courage to feel more confident about their future. Can you imagine them going around shouting, “He’s baaack!” There must have been an excitement they hadn’t felt for some time.

As Luke describes it, Jesus was showing up more and more frequently. Sure, he was different than before; remember that he walked through locked doors and showed off his crucifixion wounds for anyone who needed to see the proof? But he was also showing up for meals, going on road trips, and interacting with the disciples again. While Jesus was always one for turning the expected on its head, I’ll bet by the 40th day after the resurrection the disciples were busy trying to figure out what this latest turn of events would mean for their lives. They were probably anxious for things to get back to where they were, what with the added resurrection from the dead it seemed like the sky was the limit for the potential popularity and power of Jesus and his gang. He was back!

Yes, earlier they thought all was lost, but Jesus came back. Everyone saw him crucified, but he was alive again. What would this mean for their future? There would be no more amateur speaking circuit; the disciples must have been sure that, when everyone figured out the Jesus who healed them, fed them, taught them, and physically triumphed over the cruel torture of the Roman government, then everything would change for the better. No more shoestring budget. No more sleeping outside. They were headed for the big time.

They had it in their heads that things were back to normal, well if not exactly normal, then some sort of hyper-speed rocket to superstardom, to finally feel that—despite a rather large setback with the whole crucifixion thing—the decision they'd made three years before was finally starting to pay off. I'd like to think that maybe a few of them had a suspicion in the corner of their minds, a little bit of wonderment about exactly what Jesus had in mind, but remember, they all suspected from the get-go that he was here to make a really big splash, you know, to release Israel from foreign domination, to restore the monarchy, to bring back all the political power and prestige of the Jewish people.

Yes, in fact we know that's what they were thinking when they gathered together high up on a hill that afternoon about 40 days after the resurrection. In fact, Luke tells us in this Acts passage that once they'd assembled around him, they asked him again, "*Lord, are you **at this time** going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" (v. 6).

Know what he says? Probably after sighing dramatically, because by now he must have had it up to here with these lame brained disciples, Jesus said, "*That is an irrelevant question that really does not concern you. But let's talk about what **is** going to happen next: YOU will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. YOU will be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth*" (v. 8). I came to empower YOU, Jesus said to them. And then up into the sky he went.

Well, we know what happens to the disciples. They watched in amazement as Jesus was carried up into the sky. Their necks were bent backwards, their hands

shielding their eyes from the glare of the sun as they stared, open-mouthed into the sky. “What NOW?” they must have thought. And they stood there. And stood there, in silence, staring up at the sky as Jesus disappeared from their view. Well, in case they were not, in fact, listening to Jesus before he left, they certainly listened a few minutes later when two men in white robes suddenly appeared before them and said, “*Men of Galilee,*” they said, “*why do you stand here looking into the sky?*” (v. 11). In other words, “Why are you standing here hurting your necks like that?” You’re not accomplishing anything just standing there! Weren’t you listening to Jesus? It’s time to get busy. YOU are the witnesses, and, in case you still had any doubts whatsoever, this whole adventure of following Jesus is not about accommodating to the expectations of this world—nope! It’s about being witnesses, so that the transformation going on in *you* can go on in *people around you*, in this city, in this world. No more looking up to the sky because you expect to see the next coming attraction. YOU are my witnesses, and YOU should get busy with the work of witnessing!

It was June 1989 and if you were alive you probably remember it. For months there had been organized protests by students, intellectuals and labor activists in the People’s Republic of China, protests calling for reform of government policies limiting freedom. Early in the morning of June 4, the People’s Liberation Army sent troops and tanks into the middle of the protests, into Tiananmen Square to crush the protests and disperse the crowds. The massacre was heartbreaking. Reports vary on the number of protestors who died that day in Tiananmen Square, but most put numbers in the thousands. Organizers who had worked to ensure peaceful protests were stunned and the whole world watched in horror as the situation unfolded.

Early the next morning, June 5, Associated Press photographer Jeff Widener was looking off his balcony on the sixth floor of the Beijing Hotel. He suddenly saw about half a mile away, a column of four army tanks making their way down the Chang An Da Jie, the “Great Avenue of Everlasting Peace.” He pulled out his camera, attached a powerful long-range lens and trained it on the scene

unfolding in front of him. The picture he took, called “Tank Man” by some, was broadcast all over the world just a few hours later.

Do you remember that picture? It’s a stark image of four huge army tanks lined up in succession on the road. Right out in front of the first tank stands a man, one lone man, wearing a white shirt and black pants and holding a bag in his hand. As the tanks came to a stop it appeared that the man was trying to wave them away. The front tank then tried to change course and steer around the man, but he kept moving to stand in front of the tank as a statement of resistance. Witnesses say the man finally climbed up on the top of the lead tank to talk to the driver. “Why are you here?” he reportedly asked. “My city is in chaos because of you. Go back, turn around, and stop killing my people.”

If you were to look at this picture you would see a striking image. You would see a long line of formidable war machinery lined up and ready to attack. And you would see very clearly the form of one man—one lone man—blocking the progress of the violence. This is an image of the kind of witnessing Jesus invites his disciples to participate in.

The disciples thought Jesus meant to take over the palace and ensconce them in lives of power and lavish personal wealth. But Jesus was inviting them to throw those old ways of thinking to the side and to offer their voices to be like his voice: a lonely herald calling out over and over and invitation to be part of the mission.

For the disciples and for us, it’s rather tempting to stand around gazing open-mouthed into the sky, isn’t it? **We often suffer from a lack of focus.** When people lack focus, they usually allow others to set their agenda. In my line of work a lack of focus keeps pastors jumping from one crisis to another without ever achieving an all-consuming mission. One veteran pastor writes “I was mentoring a young pastor who had all the skills to lead a church except one—he couldn’t focus on the one thing that would start his dying church growing again. All he needed to do was start a new worship service for a new ethnic group in his community. But he couldn’t seem to do it. He couldn’t focus on

this one thing long enough to make it happen. He finally started the new service and in ten years the church grew from 300 to over 1100 worshipers.

The gospel of Jesus is the way of missional change—**that is our focus**—and the invitation we've received from Jesus is to live our lives ushering in the reign of God's kingdom. Nobody's going to do it for us. We're the ones Jesus empowers to do the work. So be sure you don't get caught standing around staring up into space, because there's far too much we've got to do. Are you focused on serving God and bringing the Kingdom of God to earth?

What should be our first order of business at Ken Mawr in 2025? Answer: Stop staring open-mouthed into the sky expecting the way of God to effortlessly and mysteriously become the way of this world. No longer will we follow every trend, fad, craze, movement, or ideology that comes down the pike. *“We will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming”* as the Apostle puts it in Ephesians 4:14. No longer will we expect God to do what Jesus has called *us to do*.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Savior, has left us in charge of his work and mission in this world. That should be our FOCUS. We can pretend not to hear it, but he clearly said to us, *“and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (v. 8).

It's time we got busy...

Amen.