

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, May 4, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"LOOKING OUTWARD, UPWARD AND FORWARD"

Acts 1:8-12

From Acts we read of Jesus' ascension which took place forty days after his resurrection. Having shown himself alive to his disciples with many proofs, it was now time for Jesus to return to heaven. And he gave the disciples final instructions, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."

Now physically humans cannot look in more than one direction at a time. Actually did you know that there is a fish that can do that? What a wonderful variety God has put into his creation! It's called the anablep and lives in the rivers and lakes of Central and South America. It really only has two eyes, but the retinas of each eye are divided into two segments, so that it effectively has four eyes. The anablep can see upwards and downwards at the same time. So it swims near the surface looking up to catch any bugs or insects near the water while at the same time looking beneath the water for any smaller fish or water creatures to feast on. Now we cannot see in two directions at once (though there are times when it would be helpful, such as when driving in heavy traffic, or looking after several rambunctious toddlers!). But spiritually speaking Christians can look in more than one direction. In fact, Christ calls us and enables us to do it. With Christ in our lives we can look outward, upward, and forward.

First, followers of Jesus look outward.

Jesus told his followers "to be my witnesses in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." By his blood shed on the cross and his resurrection victory Jesus Christ has opened for us a place in the Father's family forever, a place we receive through faith in Christ. He calls us his own and calls us to be his witnesses. We are to look outward, to seek opportunities to spread his Name.

A group of Christians left their church to form "the perfect church." They considered themselves a real blessing to God's Kingdom and put a sign outside their church, "JESUS ONLY." That was fine, except that the church didn't reach

out to their community; they only ministered to themselves. One day a passerby noticed that the first three letters had fallen off their sign to reveal a new message, "US ONLY."

Some religions are by nature inward looking. But not true Christianity. Christ calls Christians to look outward and seek opportunities to be witnesses for Christ. In fact, this is how Christ always spreads the Gospel in the world - through people like us whom he has chosen and called to follow him. We are to tell others what Jesus has done for us and for the world, through his life, death and resurrection. And even in times when it's inappropriate to speak, we witness by our lives. We are a people called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be Christ's witnesses. We spread the message of Jesus through word and deed. Now we can't do it all which is why we support people financially to do it. We call them missionaries and evangelists. But supporting missionaries doesn't take away the responsibility of each Christian to be a witness for Christ.

A young woman and a young man were walking together to the cafeteria after class. "I've been watching you," she said, "You're different."

"What do you mean by different?" he asked in surprise.

"I mean, in class, you show respect for people. When you speak, I can tell that you care, really care for the needs of others. I've asked myself Why? What makes him different? I don't know. So I thought I'd ask you myself."

So he told her about his school Bible-study and prayer group. He told how his Christian faith made a difference to his life. He invited her to come along with him next week.

"You shall be my witnesses..." Christians look outward.

Secondly, Christians look upward.

Verse 10, "While he was going, and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Now there seems to be a slight rebuke in those words, as if, "Why are you looking upward, when you could be looking outward?" Perhaps so, but there's no doubt that followers of Jesus do need to look upward.

An interesting question arose in one confirmation class, "Where is Jesus now?" Well, he is seated bodily in heaven at the Father's right hand, and he is

with us now by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. It's always good to look up to heaven. and remember that Jesus is Lord over God's creation, who will come again as judge and ruler of all. And we are invited to look upward to the Lord daily in prayer, to ask for his help, to give him our concerns, and be ready to receive the Holy Spirit.

Now I hope you confirmands and all of us look downwards to our Bibles regularly too, for we need the daily nourishment and instruction of God's word. But let's look up each day, too. For our hope and strength does not come from within ourselves; our hope and strength comes from above where Christ reigns in glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit. It is from above that the Holy Spirit comes to dwell with us and within us. So look up, look upwards to heaven in wonder and prayer and thanksgiving. "All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love."

Finally, followers of Jesus look forward.

The apostles watched as Jesus was taken up to heaven in a cloud. After hearing that Jesus would return in the same way as they saw him go, they returned to Jerusalem and devoted themselves to prayer and waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit. They were preparing themselves for the challenges and adventures that lay ahead. There is much to look forward to in the Christian life. Confirmation is an important step, but it's really only a start of a journey with Jesus.

Now as followers of Jesus we look forward to inheriting the place in heaven Jesus has prepared for his faithful people. Some of us here today are closer to heaven on our journey than others. But we should never forget that the Christian life promises a future of indescribable joy and blessing and service in the nearer presence of God and all his saints. Christ is returning to rule and reign, but he is also returning for you and me, his faithful followers, to take us home.

But right here on this earth there is much ahead of us as we follow Jesus, growth in character, greater understanding of the Bible and of God's plan for your life and for the whole creation, new friendships with other Christians, new experiences of God's love and grace and faithfulness, new opportunities to share your gifts in Christian service in the church. When you walk with Jesus, there is always much to look forward to.

On Confirmation Sunday, I always think of my own confirmation at age 15. I knew that it was somehow special, though as I look back now there was so much I had yet to learn and experience. But I confessed Jesus as my Saviour

and Lord that day, and I well remember kneeling on the steps before the pulpit and having hands laid on me, as my parents and grandparents watched from the congregation. On that day, I couldn't have imagined what was ahead of me in the Christian life. It has been and continues to be a great adventure. And I can tell you that Jesus has been far, far, more faithful to me than I have been to him. His grace and love are truly amazing and those gifts are symbolized in the bread and cup here on this table. We can look forward because Jesus forgives the past and continually opens for us a new future. For the Christian, there is always something wonderful to look forward to.

That is the promise of the Christian life. With Christ in our hearts and lives, the best is always ahead of us. Always. So Christians, put all your trust in Jesus Christ and he will help you to look outward, to look upward, and to look forward.