

Ascension Sunday, May 16, 2021 LFLC

"Look around you, for crying out loud!"

I would guess that that phrase is one of those
we either heard a lot when we were kids or said a lot to our kids."

"I can't find my shoes."

"Where is my baseball glove?"

"But my room is clean."

"Look around you, for crying out loud!"

And I suppose that is one direction we can look,
although there is little comfort in doing so.

After all, what we see when we look around is a conga line of preachers
proclaiming the gospel of prosperity while dunning their listeners for money;
or lying or adulterous political or business leaders
convinced they are above ethics and the law;

looking around we see corruption and waste at the highest levels
of financial and governmental institutions;
and we hear charges and counter-charges hurled back and forth
between business and labour, corporations and environmentalists.

Looking around isn't all that pleasant a prospect.

And for that reason, I guess, it is only natural to want to look back—
to look back to the so-called "good old days"

when children used to obey their parents and teachers taught for love, not money;
when the police used to be respected and criminals were afraid of getting caught;
when preachers were principled and national leaders told the truth.

And yet, as often as we try and convince ourselves that the "good old days" really were better,
we are uncomfortably aware that our own words ring hollow in even our own ears.

After all, Hitler and Auschwitz were part of the good old days;
farm foreclosures, polio and scarlet fever, apartheid in South Africa,
massacres in Rwanda and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans,
two world wars followed by more wars in Korea and Viet Nam
resulting in the deaths of millions. . .including thousands of Canadian troops—
they, too, were part of the good old days.

Sometimes, I think that if we look back with any sense of honesty,
we have to admit that the best thing about the good old days
was that we made it through them and survived in spite of them.

There is a third direction to look besides around or back. . .and it is ahead—
but without giving away any secrets, I'm sure you are all aware
that the future doesn't look all that promising either.

Climate change is real and disappearing glaciers and ice caps are evidence of it;
 Environmental destruction is taking place on a massive and rapid scale;
 our seas and their inhabitants are being choked by pollution and plastics;
 our air is fouled by toxic emissions;
 our food poisoned by cancer-causing additives and pesticides;
 our rivers and lakes are dying from acid rain or run-offs
 from fertilizers or holding ponds used to store the waste
 left over from extracting oil from tar sands and minerals from rocks;
 while our forests are disappearing because of beetle infestations
 or raging wild-fires, and indiscriminate deforestation of carbon sinks.

And adding to that list of horrors: The number of refugees is escalating year by year;
 newer and deadly diseases and viruses are on the rise (no kidding, eh?);
 threats of war, limited or even nuclear, pop up more and more often;
 and the end of life, or human life as we know it, seems, if not inevitable, at least possible.

In sum: Looking ahead to the future doesn't give any more encouragement or hope
 than does looking around or looking back.

And even looking down--that is, inside or within us--is of limited help or comfort.
 21st century charlatans continue to make fortunes left, right and centre
 by trying to convince us that the answer to all of our dilemmas can be found inside us—
 by discovering and then releasing our human potential
 or by spiritual deep-diving through yoga or mindfulness
 or attending lengthy and costly retreats and workshops.

But anybody who has taken an honest and frank look at themselves
 knows that the look inside is even more depressing than the look outside.

2500 years ago, the Athenian philosopher, Socrates, confessed that a long look within himself
 was the most distressing of all because he found there only a monster.

And Jesus lists the works of that monster:

"Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries,
 fornication, thefts, false witness and blasphemies."

And St. Paul expressed the frustration and confusion
 of all of humanity when he wrote in Romans:

"I do not understand my own actions for I do not do what I want to do,
 but I do the very thing I hate. . .I know that nothing good
 dwells within me for I can will what is right but I cannot do it.

Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

"Enough!" you say. "We give up! Enough of this grim news."

Is there nowhere we can look to escape this depressing litany
 of sins and shortcomings, failings and fears?

"Well, Yes," the answer is, "Yes, there is."

But it is not around or behind or ahead or down or within but up.

Look up! And I mean "UP!" in a metaphorical and not literal sense
 as if God is "up there" or "out there" somewhere.

Instead, with the understanding of "up" being in the direction of God,
then, as we remember the Ascension of our Lord this morning,

I want to ask you three questions:

1. If you aren't looking up, why aren't you?
2. When you do look up, what do you see?
3. After you look up, what are you going to do then?

First, why don't we look up? Well, I think one of the reasons
is because we are distracted from doing so.

After all, we live in a world of distractions.

Our ears are bombarded with noise;
our eyes are overstimulated by many different media
from large screens to middle-size screens to small screens;
our spirits are overwhelmed by the increasing crowds or the new traffic jams;
by multiple choices of everything; and by obscene displays of opulence.

Indeed, the art of being alone. . .or simply being silent,
still and quiet in body and soul is virtually unknown anymore.

About the only time we are quiet anymore is when we are in elevators
where everybody stares at the numbers above the door
as if they have never seen numbers before.

And maybe the only other time we are still is in church
or preparing for a book study on meditation when we are forced to be so.

However, even there our minds wander aimlessly over last week's problems
or race quickly over today's upcoming schedule or "to do" list
until we are finally rescued from this uncomfortable,
unfamiliar and even frightening experience of silence
by the welcome sound of another's voice calling us by name
and either asking us for a favour or reminding us of an appointment.

Distractions. From morning until night, we feed on a parade of them.

And it is perhaps a most unfortunate consequence of those distractions
that it seems the only way God has to get us to look up
is by allowing devastating problems like illness or sorrow to get us down—
to put us flat on our backs where the only direction left to look. . .is up.

But being distracted isn't the only reason we don't look up.

I think the second reason is because we are scared--scared of God,
even if we claim we are not. . .and the reason we are scared
is because we feel guilty and know we are guilty. . .
and we know that God knows that too. . .
which is why we confess our sins at worship so regularly
even if we don't always think about or take seriously what we are admitting to.

As a result, just as when we speed in a car and look around for a police cruiser
in the hope of not finding one, so, having broken God's laws,
we look every way but up hoping to avoid meeting God's gaze—

and we do so because we are convinced that if we do look up,
 we will find God looking down. . .and if God is looking down--
 (metaphorically speaking)--then we won't have to go looking for trouble
 because we will have found it. . .in spades.

And we are right. Because when we look up, Luther says,
 through the window of God's law--that is, all those "have to's" and "shoulds"
 and "oughts" and "musts" and "don'ts" and "shall nots"--
 when we do that, Luther says, we see only an angry judge
 who demands perfection and holiness from us
 and dispenses punishment for our failure to be so.

And that, Luther says, is precisely the reason we need the gospel—the good news--
 why we need to look for and find Christ. . .

or, more accurately, to be sought and found by Christ.

For you see, when we look up through the window of the gospel,
 we see the cross before us. . .and on the face of the one
 hanging on that cross, we see the face of God--
 a God who expects holiness and perfection, yes, but who has given us
 that perfection and holiness as a gift in and through Christ.

And when we are "in Christ", as St. Paul terms it,
 or when we "believe in Jesus" as St. John terms it
 or when we "come to the Father in my name" as Jesus puts it,
 then we don't need to be afraid to look up.

On the contrary, we can rejoice in the opportunity to look up
 because looking up where we find a loving God who has no intention of letting us down.
 Looking up is where we see a God who not only created us but who will not let us go;
 looking up is where we see a God who cares about us,
 who has called to a new life now and forever;
 a God who will restore and establish, strengthen and uphold us;
 a God who loves us beyond all imagining.

But then what? In answer to the third question I asked earlier:
 After we have looked up and found and seen this loving God, then what?
 Well, there are several answers to that.

One of them is, having looked up, we can now look around us and see,
 not distractions or dismaying problems, but opportunities for ministry—
 that is, for service to God and to the world;
 opportunities to share that love of God and loving God with others;
 opportunities to show to others the new life we have received from Christ;
 opportunities to serve those around us in need of our service.

Next, having looked up, we can now look back and see, not a phony past filled with false memories
 or a depressing past filled with abandonment or struggle and loss
 but a past filled to overflowing with the continual care
 and support, compassion and companionship of God.

True, the past may not always have been wonderful and glorious
 but the One who was always present in it and present with us was. . .
 and is. . .wonderful. . .and glorious.

Next, having looked up, we can now look ahead and see
 not only environmental, social and political problems,
 but see the strong and sure arms of God reaching out to embrace
 the whole creation and everything and everyone on it and in it.
 Having looked up, we are now able to hear
 the promise of this God that there is nothing
 in all creation and or opposed to all creation
 that will ever be able to separate us from the love and presence of God.

Finally, having looked up, we can now look down. . .inside--and see,
 not only the monster who lives within, but the saint who lives there as well. . .
 not only the guilty sinner but the forgiven one, too.
 And then, no longer having to deny our failures
 or run away from our faults or medicate ourselves
 because of our fears and our weaknesses and worries--
 now we can freely--even gladly-- admit that all of that painful and true stuff
 is really all there. . .and then go on with living joyfully and confidently, nonetheless.

After all, if the God who knows us better than we know ourselves--
 if that God accepts and loves us just the way we are,then surely we can do the same. . .
 and love and forgive and accept and care for ourselves
 just as we are. . .just as we are. . .just as we are.

So, looking up we see God; looking around we see God;
 looking back or behind we see God, looking ahead we see God;
 and looking within we see God--the One to whom all things belong--
 including all thanksgiving and glory and honour now and forever.

Amen. SDG