

“Why Do You Stand Staring in the Sky”

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1/17/99

Sermon Transcript

Today we're beginning to preach from the book of Acts. Acts is a companion volume to the Gospel of Luke. Acts Chapter 1:1 ... *“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God.*

And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’

He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.’ And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’”

Hey, there, men of Galilee, what are you doing standing there staring into heaven? What kind of question is that? I looked into some commentaries and some said this: the angels were trying to point out that Jesus had just told these guys they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Men of Galilee, you have work to do, get going. What are you doing just standing there? He told you to be his witnesses. He's coming back. That means you have work to do. Get witnessing!

Is that what they meant? Maybe. That's Paul's message in I Thessalonians, basically. And that's a good message for 1999, isn't it? Time magazine's cover last week said: *THE END OF THE WORLD*. It shows a picture of a family inside, stockpiling food and water. The boy in the picture is wearing a tee shirt which says, *“JESUS IS LIFE.”*

How is Jesus life? He tells us how to save our own can in the coming apocalypse--we've got to have food and water, etc. What a witness that is, how heartwarming. If Jesus coming back means we're to be doing the work of Jesus, like Jesus, then maybe when Y2K hits, if it hits, you ought to put a sign out in front of your house which says *FREE FOOD, FREE WATER, TAKE ALL YOU WANT. (P.S. WE STARVE BETTER THAN YOU, WE STARVE LAUGHING.)*

That's the kind of witnesses you'll find in the Book of Acts. Don't stress too much, though. I don't think Jesus is coming back this year. I really don't. It says in the Book of Acts *it's not for you to know the times or the seasons*. In I Thessalonians Paul tells us

Jesus will come like a thief like in the night when the world least expects it. January 1, 2000 AD is when the world most expects it. *And, so, that's when I least expect it.*

That doesn't mean I think Y2K may not hit or your bank account won't fall apart, or your fancy new car may not start--it just means I'm not going to be out in the field staring in the sky. I'm going to put on my leisure suit and drive around in my 1967 Ford Mustang laughing at all you, ha, ha, ha! You're driving your fancy computer-chip-electronic-ignition car. Look at me, wave of the future, distributor cap right here. That's what I'm planning on doing.

Is that what the angels are getting at? *Hey, guys, get busy* like the bumper sticker JESUS IS COMING, LOOK BUSY Is that what they meant? That's what I thought they meant until I started reading it more closely. I realized Jesus told them they aren't going to be his witnesses until something happens, right? And so, they're supposed to wait. So, is that what the angels are saying? *Men of Galilee, hurry up and wait?* Maybe. Maybe not.

(The angels say:) *Men of Galilee why do you stand there staring into the heavens? Is it because you just saw that Jesus ascended? Are you amazed that he went up? We're amazed he ever came down. A baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. And to think He told you He's coming back--not just on the cloud of heaven, but that He's coming in his spirit, back.*

Luke starts Acts by telling Theophilus his first book was about what Jesus *began* to do and teach. So really the title of the second book ought not be *The Acts of the Apostles* but *The Acts of Jesus Through the Apostles*. Maybe the angels are saying, *You ought to be amazed He would come in his spirit. It's going to be really cool on the clouds of heaven, but He's coming in his spirit. Think of that, He's going to come down to a guy like Peter, a traitor, and He's going to raise a girl named Tabitha from the dead.* (Check it out in Acts, Chapter 9.)

And he's going to come down to a guy Paul, a murderer chief of all sinners. Do you know what he's going to do in Paul? He's going to invade the empire of Rome. And when? He's going to come down in the last and the least and the poor and in the infirm and the sick and in young life leaders and Sunday school teachers. We think that's pretty impressive. You ought to be amazed at that. Is that what the angels meant when they said, "Men of Galilee why do you stand there staring at the heavens?"

Is that what they meant? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe those angel guys didn't mean anything. Did you ever think that? Maybe they were just amazed the men of Galilee were amazed. I think we've met these two guys before, end of the book of Luke, just a few chapters before this, because it's a companion volume.

The women went to the tomb and are amazed and perplexed because the stone is rolled away and they can't find the body of Jesus. They're standing there when these two guys in dazzling apparel, Luke says, walk up to them and say, (paraphrase) *"What are you doing here? Why do you seek the living among the dead? Didn't he tell you about the third day and what was going to happen? He did tell you, didn't he? So, what are you doing here?"*

Maybe they're all sincere questions. Angels really do have some questions for us. They

long to look into our salvation. I have this theory these two angels were like rookie angels from the other side of the galaxy--called down on active duty to do service around Easter and Ascension Sunday. They're asking some sincere questions: *"Excuse me, ma'am, but do you know who He is? Didn't he tell you he wouldn't be here? And you come looking for him among the dead?"*

And the angels ask: *"And you're amazed He's flown up in the air? Does that impress you that He would go up? That's exactly where we expected Him to go. What's so strange about that? Why are you staring in the sky?"*

If the men of Galilee were honest, wouldn't they have to say something like this: *"Sorry, but you see, we just don't see that kind of thing around here everyday--people rising from the dead and floating up into space. We have a law about that--it's called gravity, and He broke that law. We're having a hard time believing that because that's extremely abnormal."*

The angels look at the men of Galilee at that point and say, *"Have you ever considered that you and your world are abnormal, and He is normal?"*

Which brings me to a question I've been meaning to ask for a while: *Men and women of the Denver metropolitan area, why do you sit there staring at my leisure suit? How come? Jealousy? Because maybe I am normal and you are all abnormal?* Seriously, it would be just as logical for me to stand up here and say: *Men and women of the Denver area, how is that you all dress so poorly?* Amazing.

Why do you stare at my leisure suit,--is it written in the very fabric of reality that leisure suits are geeky? I thought they were geeky at one time. In 1973, I even remember the place toward the top of our street and thinking to myself: *It is inconceivable to me that at one time people actually thought straight-leg-jeans and button-down-collars and the wet look were cool. Therefore, it must be written in the very fabric of reality (or the nature of things) that bell bottom pants, feely shirts, pooka shells, and the dry look are inherently beautiful. I am so thankful I live in the early 1970's when men have discovered the inherent beauty of polyester and bell-bottoms.*

I supposed that what was true was what was normal for me. However, that is not a logical supposition. I got you. You feel convicted, don't you? Which means it's perfectly logical for me to say something like this: *Perhaps those angel men in their dazzling white apparel were wearing leisure suits. Perhaps the ascribed apparel of the kingdom of God is leisure suits. And if they all wear leisure suits in the kingdom of God, then I am what? More normal than you.*

Think about it--eternal rest--leisure suits. It makes sense, doesn't it. You aren't going to learn deep truths like that at some other church.

My main point is this: *We tend to think what is true is normal for us.* That's why people experience such culture shock when they travel. Think about those angels and how far they traveled. Talk about culture shock, angels from the consummated kingdom of God encountering men from the fallen kingdoms of this world. Scripture says (and you can thank God for this) that the kingdom of God does not consist of food and clothing. There really are some big differences, aren't there? And I'll bet you normal there is not normal here. And normal there is ultimately normal. What I mean by that is it's truth, eternal unchanging truth.

What we call normal here is illusory, transient, and not eternal. And likewise there are laws out there with real authority and real consequence, eternal unchanging laws. Then there are things we like to call laws. For instance, when I got to know my wife, she informed me there are laws of fashion, and that I frequently broke these laws. I remember saying, "*Says who? Under whose authority says it's a law--the fashion police from Vogue Magazine? If so, I renounce their jurisdiction.*"

She would say things like, "*Peter, everybody knows there are some things you do with stripes and some things you don't.*"

I think I was right that the laws of fashion don't have any inherent, internal logical substance to them. They are just what people normally do. Maybe according to a powerful norm from Vogue magazine. *Have you ever considered maybe the laws of science and this physical world are just a description of what matter normally does?*

Do you know what the study of science really is? It's the study of what matter normally does in this world. Science is like the fashion of a fallen world. For what is science at it's core? At it's core it's basically this: We ran some experiments back in the early 1970s regarding apples. All the apples had the same mass. We dropped them from trees like Sir Isaac Newton, and we found the gravitational force equaled the mass of the apple times its acceleration. Therefore, force must equal mass times acceleration. It's a physical law!

Oh yeah? Just because something has been, does that mean it should be, or has to be? We also ran a series of experiments back in 1973 and we found every boy wore a leisure suit to the dance. Therefore, it is a physical law that in order to dance a boy must wear a leisure suit. Have you ever considered that maybe we believe or trust in the laws of science in the same way we trust laws of fashion? You say, "*Oh, Come on.*"

You know you can break the laws of fashion--you're a testimony to that. You can break the laws of fashion but you can't break the laws of science. Says who--Jesus or Scientific American Magazine? These angels looked at these guys and said: *What are you doing staring at the sky?*

You don't mean to tell me you put your faith in what's normal for you, here? If we believe that the only thing that can happen is what we've seen happen, then we're stuck in our world. And that's the problem with adults many times--they stop growing, not only in body, but in mind and spirit. When we came to the service last night, I put on my leisure suit and walked downstairs and none of my kids even noticed. John said, "*Dad,*

you got a new suit.” I said, “Yeah.”

We were driving up in the car, and we were talking about my suit, and 4-year-old Coleman said, *“Daddy, why are you wearing a leisure suit?”* And I said, *“Do you like my leisure suit?”* He said, *“Oh, Dad, I think it’s cool.”*

Now my wife, 38 years old, would just not stop laughing, saying *“I can’t believe I married you.”*

Do you understand why Jesus said, *“If you want to see my kingdom, you must become like a little child.”* If the only thing that can happen is what you’ve seen happen, you’d never change, you’d still be wearing leisure suits. You’d never discover anything new. And real scientists know that, even if science teachers don’t know that. That force equals mass times acceleration is really actually not a law, as much as an expectation.

A couple of years ago at Duke University, the freshman physics professor showed up to class wearing a red dress, red pumps and a purse. (I thought about that but decided not.) He gave his entire lecture. At the end of the lecture, one of the students finally raised his hand and said, *“Professor, what’s with the dress?”* He stopped and said, *“Thank you for asking me. I’ve been waiting to tell you, but you see, we’ve found in physics in the last 50 years or so, there haven’t been any earthshaking new discoveries. All the great discoveries, all the great new knowledge came from the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. People wonder why that is. I have this theory we’ve been attracting to physics the kind of students who think we’ve got it figured out. That we know what is is. That we’ve got it normalized.”*

We need students who would come to physics class and physics lab expecting the unexpected. Expecting to be surprised, expecting that maybe force does not always equal mass times acceleration, like Albert Einstein did in the 1930s. He wondered if there was something deeper than that, like $E=MC^2$. And deeper than that, maybe, God.

Perhaps there is a deeper normal than your normal and a higher truth than your truth. If we’re going to grow in faith as a congregation maybe we need folks showing up for worship for the study of the Book of Acts expecting to be surprised. For is the Christian life a pilgrimage to a kingdom that does not change, which is eternal truth? Or, on the other hand, is the Christian life a monument to what we do—tradition--and therefore we don’t change?

But even more than that, maybe our entire normal is really abnormal. Who am I to say what’s ultimately normal, ultimately true, and ultimately right? How could I ever do that--what arrogance of me to think I could do that. I can’t call up eternal truth, but maybe truth can call on me. I can’t find reality, but what if reality found me? *I can’t set truth free in this fallen world, but what if truth entered this fallen world and set me free? My only hope of knowing the truth is if the truth somehow decided to know me.*

Why do you stand there staring in the sky? Looking for truth? The laws of this world aren’t really laws so much as descriptions of what happens in this world. And yet, you and I each have a sense that there is law--which is eternal unchanging law with real authority behind it, and real consequences to violating it. Yet, this is the really weird thing: *this law is not what we normally see happening in this world.*

Take the law of justice which I think really is the same as the law of love. It’s very

abnormal for this world. What is normal for this world? Biologists tell us it's the survival of the fittest, the strong will survive. But real love and real justice demand that we guard and protect the weak and the least fit. Christian love and justice are in direct opposition to the law of the survival of the fittest, what we normally see occurring in this world. So, when we see a person like Mother Teresa, who of her own free will walks the streets of Calcutta touching the lepers, and holding them to herself as they die, we say, *"That's weird. That's abnormal."*

When a man named Jesus picks up his cross and dies we say, *"That is strange, abnormal."* Breaking the law of the survival of the fittest, yet it seems that what is normal here--(what we normally see) is not normal some place else. That someplace else one day we're going to have to give account, that's what we sense and feel. *And if we break the laws of that someplace else, there might just be hell to pay.*

So, people around the world stare into the sky because the sky is a place other than here, beyond the gravitational pull of this rock on which we live. They stare in the sky wondering: *What is justice? Where does it come from? What is love, sacrificial love? And how do you explain life in a world that seems to be possessed with the laws of entropy and decay and death and self?* Maybe the angels meant: *Why do men and women worldwide go out and stare up into the sky?*

My brother-in-law died last week and everyone expected him to die because the doctors said he would. Furthermore, everyone knew that death was exceedingly normal. And yet when my mother-in-law called me at 4:30 in the morning, she was in absolute shock. When I did the funeral, the people sat there staring at the corpse, amazed, as if they'd been violated, as if something incredibly not right and abnormal had just happened. And I thought that, too. To think that he was here one moment in time and now he's gone. The woman at the tomb was amazed that the dead man lived, but we're amazed that the living man dies, aren't we? Here one moment, gone the next.

"We are so little reconciled to time that we are even astonished at it. 'How he's grown,' we exclaim, 'How time flies.' As though the universal form of our experience were again and again a novelty--that is abnormal. It is as strange as if a fish were repeatedly surprised at the wetness of water. That would be strange indeed unless the fish were destined to become one day a land animal." I love that quote by C.S. Lewis.

It reminds me of this one by Paul, *"I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self. But I see another law in my members at war with that law. O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?"*

Why do men and women around the world stand there staring into the sky? Could it be they're waiting for a deliverer, a savior from beyond this world of death, decay, shame and entropy? Could they be waiting for a savior or deliverer from another place beyond the gravitational pull of this rock who would come to this earth and show us what is ultimately true and make us ultimately normal? For we are beginning to suspect we don't belong here, and I want to go home.

That's Jesus, that deliverer, and surely those angels knew it. And so, their question could have been very sincere in this way: *"Why do you stand there staring in the sky?"* in the

sense they might say: *“What does that feel like to be saved, to believe, and yet not believe, to stare into the sky with longing for home---what is that like?”*

Maybe the question isn't so much an accusation as an affirmation. Maybe it was like this, *“Hey, men of Galilee you're staring in the sky because you're beginning to believe, aren't you? You're beginning to believe this very same Jesus, who you lived with for three years, who has just now ascended in a cloud in glory and is sitting at the right hand of the Father, you're beginning to see him now, aren't you? And you're beginning to believe that he will really return in the same way.*

You're beginning to see He is the sovereign Lord of all reality, and he is normal, the ultimate norm. He is true, he is eternal, he is reality, this very same Jesus you watch touch lepers and you watch make food for a crowd, the one who cried at his friend's funeral and raised him from the dead. This very same Jesus who looked down at a naked beaten prostitute lying in the dust, and said: 'Sweetheart, I don't condemn you, now go and sin no more.' You're beginning to realize this very same Jesus, who of his own free will took up a cross, suffered and died for the last and the least--that this Jesus is the truth and the way and the life.”

The author of Hebrews says we do not see all things in subjection to Him, but we see Jesus. And maybe the angels were saying, *“Yes, you're right. Jesus is highly abnormal in your world, but your world is highly abnormal in reality. Jesus is reality.”* And in this hope, writes Paul, we are saved.

A few months ago, my wife either woke me up or was waiting for me to wake up--I'm not sure. When I woke up, she said, *“Peter, you wouldn't believe what I just saw--a vision in the corner of our room. I saw dark thunderclouds. And then the sun came out from behind the clouds in the corner of our room. But the weird thing was the dream I had before it, before I woke up. I had this dream that was so clear. I saw lines of thousands upon thousands of people descending in my dream. And as they were descending, along these lines were demons.*

The demons were poking, prodding, and mocking them, but the people hardly even noticed. They were like zombies, the walking dead. Their eyes were clouded over, like they had become used to it, and they thought it was normal. I was wondering what those people were thinking when I saw all at once this woman. But her eyes weren't cloudy, they were alive. The demons were doing the same thing to her, but she kept saying, 'There's a mistake here. I'm not supposed to be here. I'm not meant for this place.' She would turn and tell the people in the line 'I'm not supposed to be here,' and tell the demons 'I'm not supposed to be here,' and they'd just laugh at her, mock her, and torment her.”

And my wife, Susan, said, *“I watched as these lines of people all descended to this one demon, bigger and uglier than all the others with arms like spiders and 8 mouths. It would take these people one after another and throw them off this ledge into a lake of fire next to it. It was fire like molten lava and the people would be consumed and just walk into the arms of this thing like zombies. Except for the lady. When she got to this thing, she said, 'There's a mistake, there's something wrong here, I'm not supposed to be here.' They laughed at her and mocked her. The big demon grabbed her like all the rest and threw her into the lake of fire, but, Peter, she wouldn't be consumed. She wouldn't burn*

up.

The big nasty demon seemed really mad about it. He kept trying to push her down into the fire, but she kept popping up out of the fire going, 'I wasn't meant to be here, I'm not supposed to be here, there's a mistake.' And they'd push her down, and she'd pop up."

Then Susan said, "It was like the whole lake tilted and she began to float out of the reach of this demon-thing into this cool clear water, like glass. She floated a little further, and then I saw the shore. On the shore there were plants, trees and life. Jesus was there and he pulled her out of the lake. And Peter, she was gorgeous, made of spun gold. The very same lake that had consumed those other people had purified her. She looked at Jesus and said, 'I knew I wasn't supposed to be there.' And Jesus looked at her and so 'Oh yeah, that's right, sweetheart. You were meant for here.'"

And then Susan said to me "Jesus and the lady at the end must be heaven, but, Peter, what do you think those long lines were of all those walking dead and the demons?"

And I said, "Oh, Honey, I think that was here."

"You're right," she said.

One thing I do know that this is right: The wrath of God is ended, Revelations 15:2--

"And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the lamb, saying 'Great and wonderful are your deeds, O Lord God the almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the ages.'" That is more real, more true and more ultimately normal than gravity. You believe it and in this hope you are saved.

Benediction ... We're beginning to study the Book of Acts, and it gets weird. God doesn't ever want us ever to be dishonest. However, he does want us to look to him to set the parameters for our reality. So, spend some time staring in the sky and spend some time in worship. I'd like you to commit to being regular about worship every week.

There are many disciplines we do in our lives, but when we come to worship, it's like an embassy. We come here to remember what's normal at home, sing songs about home, and tell stories about home. And spend some time staring in the sky, but if two guys in white leisure suits walk up, stranger things have happened and strange things still do happen, but if while you are staring in the sky, two guys in white leisure suits walk up and ask you why you're staring in the sky, you say, "*Because my Jesus is so incredibly normal. And I and my entire world, just weird.*"

In Jesus' name, the ultimate norm.

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