

Right after World War II, a U.S. Army officer and his wife were stationed in Japan. That country had been devastated by the war. The post-war economy was in shambles. Unemployment approached 60%. People came to the Army wife's door daily looking for work.

One man said that he could do wonders for her garden if she would only give him a chance. So, for the first time in her life, this young Army wife hired a gardener. He spoke no English, but the wife, through sign language and pencil and paper gave him instructions about where to plant, prune, and pamper her garden. He listened politely and followed her instructions exactly. The garden emerged as the finest in the neighborhood. When she finally realized that her new gardener knew far more about the matter than she, the wife stopped giving him directions and let him freely care for the garden. It was magnificent.

Then one day the gardener came with an interpreter to help him express his appreciation but also his regrets. You see, **"He will no longer be able to care for your garden. He must leave."**

The wife expressed her regrets and thanked him through the interpreter for making Her's such a fine garden. Out of politeness, she asked the interpreter, **"Where is he going?"** The interpreter replied that the gardener was returning to his old job as the Professor of Horticulture at the University of Tokyo.

I can imagine, can't you, the look that must have been on that Army wife's face when she discovered, upon his leaving, that her gardener was a university professor.

The disciples of Jesus were gazing intently into the sky. Two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they asked, **"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?"** That's a good question. Why were they standing there gawking at the sky?

This is the day that we celebrate Christ's ascension into heaven. The Ascension is probably the most difficult event in the life of Jesus for us to reconcile with a scientific world view. If Jesus ascended physically into the heavens, where was he going? Does that mean that heaven is a physical place somewhere out in space? It's a problem. And yet the disciples experienced something that they felt we ought to know about. **It was a true mountaintop experience comparable to that which they experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration.** And so, they placed it in the biblical record. Therefore, we must deal with it seriously. **SO LET US ASK....**

Why were the disciples standing there looking into the sky?

FIRST, THEY WERE IN AWE OF WHO JESUS WAS AND WHAT THEY HAD EXPERIENCED.

If I had been one of Jesus' disciples and had seen him do the things he did, I would have been walking around with my mouth wide open all the time.

As the disciples stood and watched Jesus ascend to the Father, they must have been asking, "Who IS this man?" That would have been my reaction. I would not only have stood there gawking into the sky, I would have taken off my shoes. This was holy ground. I probably would have gone farther than that. I would have fallen on my knees like Thomas and cried out, "My Lord and my God!" This is heavy stuff.

On a much grander scale, it's like something that Sheri Hostetler experienced sometime back while camping in an Arizona pine forest 9100 feet up, far away from other humans. She described her experience in the magazine ARIZONA HIGHWAYS:

"I couldn't sleep that night," she writes. "Perhaps there was too much silence for ears dulled by the continuous hum of city life, of tires skidding on pavement, refrigerators running, doors slamming, and low murmuring from the apartment next door. I decided to go for a walk.

"Unzipping the tent door," she continues, "I stumbled into a land I had never seen before. Our fire circle, the log we sat on to eat, even the car were indistinguishable in this darkness that blends everything into the same shade of blue.

"Tall darkened forms " were they trees? " surrounded me. I was sure I was being watched, by whom?. . . Then I looked up and saw a sky overtaken by stars." ***And Sheri Hostetler describes the sense of awe she felt as she knew she was in the presence of God.***

"I have never lost the feeling I had while standing on that mountaintop," she writes, "that feeling of being seen by a force much more powerful than I . . . "

Many of us have had mountaintop experiences with God. They were not in the same league with the Ascension of Christ, but they left us gazing into the sky nonetheless. *"Men of Galilee,"* asked the two figures in white. *"Why do you stand looking into the sky?"* They were probably awe-stricken by who Jesus was and what they were experiencing.

SECONDLY...THEY WERE PROBABLY OVERWHELMED BY WHAT CHRIST HAD CALLED THEM TO DO. The last thing Christ said to them was, *"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."*

"What's that he's saying to us?" the disciples probably asked. *"We will be witnesses to the remotest parts of the earth?"* These were men who probably had never been more than 50 miles from home in all their lives and they were going to be his witnesses in the remotest part of the earth? **Again, their jaws drop.**

During World War I, General Douglas MacArthur was a 38-year-old brigadier general and brand-new brigade commander in France. He went forward and waited in the trenches with the battalion that was going to lead the way in a major attack.

He called the battalion commander. "Major," he said, "when the signal comes to go over the top, I want you to go first, before your men." He paused and then continued, "If you do this, your battalion will follow. You will earn the Distinguished Service Cross, and I will see that you get it."

He looked the Major over for several long moments. "I see you are going to do it," MacArthur said. "You have [the medal] now." So, saying, MacArthur unpinned a Distinguished Service Cross from his own uniform and pinned it on the uniform of the Major.

Now, I ask you, what happened when that signal came to go over the top? Well, you know as well as I do. The Major, proudly wearing a Distinguished Service Cross which he had not yet actually earned, charged out in front of his troops. And as MacArthur had forecast, his troops followed behind him.

The disciples could not know what lay before them. All they knew was that their commander had confidence in them. So, they responded kindly. Still, they must have been apprehensive about witnessing for Christ in a hostile world.

In Stuart and Jill Briscoe's book **PULLING TOGETHER WHEN YOU'RE PULLED APART**, they tell of how they met, their marriage, their family, and their ministry together over more than thirty years of marriage.

When the Briscoes were first married and living in England, they looked for ways to minister to those around them. Stuart, however, very carefully overlooked the youth hangout across the street from their house called the Cat's Whisker.

Stuart was a **SERIOUS, YOUNG BANKER** in a very proper British bank, and he just didn't feel that he could mingle comfortably with the rough looking crowd at this club.

But finally, Stuart got up his courage and walked into the Cat's Whisker. He found a tough-looking young man and his leather-and-chains clad girlfriend and began to talk to them. They were surprisingly open to him. Through a series of questions, Stuart led them to see that every non-living object around them was made for a purpose. Then he told them that they were created for a special purpose too. Stuart explained God's love and God's plan for salvation to this young couple. After he finished, Stuart asked them if they believed that. The young man answered, "No, and neither do you."

"What d' you mean? Of course I believe it," was Stuart's shocked reply.

"No, you don't and I'll tell you how I know you don't. This story is so wonderful that if you really believed it you would have been down here before tonight to tell us," the young man shouted.

With that, the young man walked off, leaving Stuart in his shock.

If you have ever tried to talk with a stranger about your faith in Jesus Christ, you will appreciate Stuart Briscoe's apprehension. It's intimidating under the best circumstances, but suppose we lived in the kind of brutal world the disciples lived in. Jesus had warned them that he was sending them out like sheep among wolves. No wonder they stood there staring into the sky. What were they to do now? What was Christ really expecting out of them? How would the world receive them? They did not know, but the call to be Christ's witnesses to the remotest parts of the world was not a call to be taken lightly. **This was scary business Christ had called them to.**

"Men of Galilee," asked the two figures in white. "Why do you stand looking into the sky?" Probably it was awe. Maybe it was apprehension. OR MAYBE IT WAS THE SUDDEN AWARENESS OF CHRIST'S ABSENCE. I'm sure that was part of it. After all, he was their Lord and Master. They had looked to him for guidance, for strength, for spiritual nourishment. What would they do now? Suddenly they felt all alone.

In the eighteenth century, most of America was a vast, dangerous, and lonesome place for traveling salesmen. Gideon Lee, who was to become the greatest leather merchant in New York, took his merchandise to Georgia, but his vessel was shipwrecked at Cape Fear, and he barely saved himself just with the clothes on his back. Accompanied by a faithful friend named Smith, who nursed him while he had been sick at St. Mary's, Lee had no other means of getting back to the North than on foot. The journey was a tedious and dismal one: several days through the pine barrens of North Carolina, without finding a house in a day's travel. Smith was a brother Yankee and bore the hardships with him with courage and humor.

"One day," Gideon Lee once said, "we were trudging along, nothing to be seen but the pitch-pine forests before and behind and on both sides of us; shoes worn out, and our feet bleeding, myself before, and Smith following after; neither of us had exchanged a word for some time, when Smith suddenly spoke out in his nasal twang: Mr. Lee!"

"Well, Smith, well what about it?" "I wish I could hear it thunder," Smith replied. "Hear it thunder? Why do you wish so?" Lee asked.

"Because they say that thunder is God's voice," Smith answered, "and if I could only hear it thunder I should know I was on God's earth; as it is now, I don't know where I am." Like the disciples Smith was feeling alone and bewildered.

As the disciples stood there gazing into the sky, they also probably wished they could hear some thunder "some sign that Christ was still with them" some acknowledgment that they were not alone. **You and I have hungered for that kind of reassurance too from time to time, haven't we?**

"Why do you stand looking into the sky?" asked the two figures in white. Awe, apprehension, awareness that Christ was no longer with them. The disciples were surely caught up in all those emotions at once. But you know how the story ends. Before he leaves, Christ makes a promise to them that the Holy Spirit will come upon them. And it did come upon them, and they moved on to the greatness Christ had promised them.

Perhaps there is some apprehension in your life right now---some uncertainty that Christ is with you as you seek to serve him outside these walls. Maybe you are listening for His THUNDER in your life.

I would ask you to focus on the *"Christ of the Ascension"* the *"Christ who is high and lifted up."*

The Christ who promises us his "Holy Spirit" to guide and to strengthen us as well.

THE CHRIST WHO PROMISES TO SEND US A MESSAGE, POSSIBLY THROUGH THE SOUND OF "THUNDER," ---THE REASSURANCE OF GOD'S VOICE.

THE PROMISE HE WILL LEAD AND GUIDE US THROUGH WHAT EVER WE ARE EXPERIENCING. TRUST IN HIM AND "LISTEN."

AMEN.