

On Ascension Day I am often reminded of a ritual practice that was common during the Middle Ages. A statue of Jesus was tied to a rope and hoisted up out of the church, over the rafters and through a hole in the ceiling — Jesus ascending. Then moments later, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, a dove or some kind of bird, was lowered on a rope down through the same hole — the Holy Spirit descending at Pentecost. It's probably a good thing I didn't try to do this as a children's time, or we would have ended up with Jesus on a rope, a bird on a wire, and a hole in the roof.

That same kind of up and down movement is captured by a mosaic that I am reminded of on Ascension Day as well, the huge mosaic of this scene that adorns the wall behind the chancel at Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Sioux Falls. From floor to ceiling it's about two stories. It is the work of artist Palmer Eide, who taught for years across the street at my alma mater, Augustana College. (Yes, the real Augustana not to be confused with that other school somewhere in Illinois.)

Because of its size, the mosaic has a way of embodying the movement of the ascension story quite effectively. The composition draws your eyes upward, and along with them, your head and your neck. Pretty soon you realize that, like the disciples in the story, you are standing there staring up into the clouds. And then you notice spelled out in golden letters the words, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" It's sort of an artistic "Gotcha!" and I'm sure the artist intended this effect. Like the story itself, his work exhorts us to get our heads out of the clouds.

The ascension is a popular subject of art. There is another mosaic of this scene in the Chapel of the Ascension in Augusta Victoria Hospital, operated by the Lutheran World Federation and located on the Mount of Olives, the supposed site of the ascension. It also incorporates the angels robed in white with their message to disciples: "People of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Though artists through the ages have found so many different ways of depicting the scene, I find it to be significant that the angels and their message is a common focal point, a kind of refrain asking all who contemplate this story, "Why do you stand looking for Jesus in the clouds?"

There is a famous woodcut of the ascension that adds an intriguing detail. If you look carefully, you notice footprints all around the disciples. As they stand gawking upward, straining to catch a glimpse of Jesus in the clouds, they miss his footprints in the world all around them. "People, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? See, his footprints are here in the world all around you."

I wonder how long it took them to remember his words? They were brief, but so important. When they asked Jesus if this was it, their time of departure—“Are you taking us up and out of here to heaven with you now?”—Jesus answered, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons that God has set . . . but 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.”

The promise of the Holy Spirit is a promise not for the clouds but for this earth, this time, this ground on which we stand. It is a promise for life in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. In Des Moines and West Des Moines, Urbandale and Clive, Waukee and Ankeny. In the United States, Asia, Africa, and planet Earth in the 21st century. Jesus isn't up and out of here. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the risen Lord is present in all times and places—in our time and our place—making tracks in the world.

Making tracks in the world through us, as we answer the call to do God's work with our hands—and feet!

Pastor Charlene Rachuy Cox, Director of Contextual Education at Wartburg Seminary (and I must add, a fellow graduate of the real Augustana!) captures this so well in a poem she wrote and posted on Facebook a couple of days ago. She writes:

"Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" (Acts 1:11).

There's work to be done.

Walls to be torn down.

Bridges to be built.

Burdens to be lifted.

Hope to be given.

Good news to be proclaimed.

Justice and righteousness to be realized.

We are Christ's body now.

Hands.

Feet.

Ears.

Eyes.

Heart.

Voice.¹

¹ Rachuy Cox, Charlene. *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=charlene%20rachuy%20cox&epa>.

People of faith, we need to get our heads out of the clouds, for there is much work to be done in this world that God loves, and we are Christ's body now. He has no hands and feet but ours.

We need to get our heads out of the clouds that prevent us from seeing the national emergency created in large part by the easy availability of guns in our country. We need to get our heads out of the clouds, church, and do everything we are capable of doing to keep people from being shot at work rather than merely praying for them after it's too late. We need to get our heads out of clouds and make some tracks in the world for Jesus.

We need to get our heads out of the clouds while there still are clouds floating in the atmosphere around our planet, and do everything in our power as people of faith to encourage our leaders and ourselves to enact the large scale, substantive, and now radical (because of decades of avoidance and inaction) changes to our economy and our lifestyles in response to climate change, or we will not have a habitable planet to hand on to our children and grandchildren. We need to get our heads out of the clouds and make some tracks in the world for Jesus.

We need to get our heads out of the clouds that keep us from seeing how our land continues to be plagued by the endemic problem of racism, from seeing how black Polk county is practically a different universe from the rest of Polk county, beginning a very few miles from where we now sit. We need to get our heads out of the clouds and make some tracks in the world for Jesus.

We need to get our heads out of the clouds of obfuscation that tell us all these things are political problems, or social and cultural problems, or secular concerns not appropriate for discussion in church, and more importantly, action on the part of the church, when in fact they are the central questions of how we love and serve the neighbor in these times in response to God's love for us in Christ. We need to get our heads out of the clouds and make some tracks in the world for Jesus.

People of God, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? There's too much work to be done. Our neighbors' lives, and the life of the planet, depend upon our willingness to do it. Let's get our heads out of the clouds and use our hands and feet to make some tracks for Jesus through this ground that God loves.