

Looking Up
John 17:6 – 19; Acts 1:3 – 14
May 13, 2018 (Ascension)

The other night I was watching TV, only half paying attention, when a commercial came on that caught my attention. It was like an infomercial for something called *Miracle Spring Water*. This wasn't like bottled water that you can buy in a store. You go to a website or call a phone number, and they will send you this little packet of water. You drink it or use it and then you will experience some kind of miracle. I went online and found the commercial, and it went like this:

Narrator's voice: Do you need a miracle? Real people with real needs are receiving real life-changing miracles when they use the Miracle Spring Water!

Woman: My husband brought the spring water and I drank it, and I'm speaking today. I had no speech. I was totally paralyzed, and now I'm testifying.

Another woman: You sent me the water and I used it. You told me I was going to get a check for \$7,000, and sure enough, I got a check in the mail, and it was exactly \$7,000.

Peter Popoff: This faith tool will help you receive *liberation* from the bondage of debt. It's *free*, I want to *send it to you*, no obligation! Call me now.

Third woman: You told me to anoint my checkbook, and yesterday I received a letter for over \$45,000, and my second mortgage is paid off!

Fourth woman: *Get* the spring water. *Drink* the spring water, or whatever you need to do with it. It really works.

Narrator: Release your faith now by calling for your free packet of Miracle Spring Water. It's free, just for calling.

So I did a little digging to check this out. It turns out that, yes, the water *is* free. Now, there is some question as to *where* the water *comes from*. Back in 2009 Popoff was using water from a spring in *Chernobyl*. You know Chernobyl, Ukraine, site of the world's worst nuclear disaster that is still uninhabitable today. So you *get* the packet of water, and you have to *sleep* with it for one night before drinking it. Then you *pray* over the empty packet and send it back to Peter Popoff – *with a donation*. And that's the catch. You *have to send money*, or else you *don't get your miracle*. (I guess the miracle is if the Chernobyl water doesn't *kill* you.) But then if you *do* send in a donation, you are bombarded with requests for *more* donations and the promise of more miracles.

Now, I grew up with these kind of televangelists in the 1980s, so I'm familiar with how this all works. But there was a part of me that was so *shocked* that someone would so brazenly advertise a scheme like this in the year 2018, with all the information we have available to us through the internet. People like this can so easily be exposed. I was watching this thinking, "How can someone *fall* for this today?" But the most recent financial data available shows that Popoff's "ministry" received over \$23 million in one year. So people *are* responding to it, because it is promising to fulfill a *need* in people. So many people find themselves in situations over which they feel like they have no power or control – financial problems, health problems – and they are

willing to *believe* and *do* just about anything for a sense of power and control. *So many people* are looking for a *miracle*.

It reminded me, strangely enough, of the story of Jesus' ascension from Acts. Jesus is lifted up into a cloud, and the disciples are left standing there, it says, gazing up toward heaven. When suddenly, two men in white robes stood by them and said, "Why are you standing there looking up toward heaven?" And I think that we can do that same thing. When we find ourselves in situations over which we feel like we do not have any power or control, we stand there staring up to heaven, waiting for a miracle; for some *sign* of God's presence and power.

There's a scene in the movie *Bruce Almighty*, where Jim Carey plays a man named Bruce, and he's having a conversation with God (played by Morgan Freeman). At one point, God says to Bruce, "People want me to do everything *for* them, and what they don't realize is that they have the power. That's your problem, Bruce. That's everybody's problem. You keep looking *up*. You want to see a miracle? *Be* the miracle."

It's like the verses on the cover of today's bulletin:

We scan the empty sky, always without success,
We're lighting signal fires and spelling S.O.S.
Are you going to wait here for a sign to let you know now?
Are you going to sit there paralyzed by what you've seen?
Or are you going to finally grip the wheel? I think you know how
Don't wait for a miracle to tumble from the sky,
To part the seas around you, turn water into wine,
Because *we* are the miracles, we happen all the time.

Now that's not to say that miracles don't exist. God *does* act in miraculous ways, and there are times when we come to the absolute end of our ability and knowledge, and the only way is the way that God makes. It's just that sometimes we're too quick to give up and say, "Only a

miracle can save us now!” And what *this* is all saying is that God has given *us* the power to do some pretty amazing things, and God doesn’t just want us to stand there staring up to heaven waiting for help, waiting for a miracle. God wants us to go out and *be* the miracle for one another, for the *world*.

Ascension Day was, for the early church, a very important holy day. We have *lost* a sense of its importance over the years, but it is one of the four major feasts of Christianity, along with Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Jesus’ ascension is actually mentioned *more times* than his resurrection in the New Testament. So for early Christians, it wasn’t just that Jesus was raised from the dead, it was very significant for them that he was raised into heaven.

Now, we have come to *hear* this as a story of Jesus’ *absence*; that Jesus has left this world, left his disciples, and essentially said to them, “This is all in your hands now. You take it from here.” But the story of Ascension is not one of Jesus’ *absence*. It is about his now cosmic *presence*. The Apostles’ Creed, which we will recite later, says that Jesus “ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” To sit at the right hand is the seat of honor and power. What this is saying is that Jesus has assumed power and authority over all of creation; that he now rules and reigns over heaven and earth. It’s not just that he was here and now he’s gone. It’s that he was here and now he is *everywhere*. And in the midst of the confusion and chaos that we often experience in the world around us, when we don’t feel like we have power or control, the message of Ascension is that Christ reigns; that ultimate power and authority now rests in the one who gave his life for us. He now reigns in power for us.

So Ascension is about Christ being with us in a new way. And that story continues next week in Pentecost, where through the Holy Spirit, Christ is present with us in a new way. There is a

sense in which Ascension and Pentecost cannot be separated. Christ's *physical* presence with us becomes Christ's *spiritual* presence with us. Christ is *over* all, and Christ is *in* all.

Because of all this, we cannot look at Ascension as Jesus *leaving* or *abandoning* this world. If anything, through Ascension and Pentecost, Jesus is *more* present in this world than ever before. And in the same way, he calls us not to abandon or forsake this world, but to be *more present in it*. Not to keep standing around, looking to heaven, waiting for Jesus to come back, but to bear witness to his rule and reign here on earth. To live in ways that show others that Jesus Christ is the Lord of heaven and earth, and that he is *with us*.

We see in John's gospel how Jesus says to God, "Everything that *you* have given to *me*, I have given to *them*. I am no longer in the world, but *they are* in the world, and I am coming to you." And then Jesus says this really interesting thing. Speaking of his followers (the disciples and us) he says, "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to *take them out* of the world. I am asking you to *protect* them in the world. Because as *you* have sent *me* into the world, so *I* have sent *them* into the world. So *sanctify* them. Make them *holy*."

Jesus is asking God to give his followers everything they need – everything *we* need – to live in this world in ways that bear witness to his power and authority and love and presence, so that Christ may be glorified in us. Ascension is not a call for us to *leave* the world. It is a call for us to take up the work of Jesus Christ *in* the world. And we *do* that trusting that we have *everything we need* because of Christ's presence *over* us and *in* us.

So we *don't* need miracles to tumble from the sky, to part the seas around us, turn water into wine. Because *we* are the miracles. We happen all the time. We happen every time a new life is brought into this world. We happen when we forgive one another or work for reconciliation and peace. We happen when we speak out against injustice and stand up for those who are powerless and oppressed. We happen when we feed those who are hungry and care for those who are sick. We happen when we break the power of addiction or keep loving and supporting someone who is *trying* to. We happen when we help someone else rise up out of loneliness or despair or fear. We happen when we give ourselves to others, as Christ gave himself to us, and when we are *with* one another, as Christ is with us.

So don't just stand around *looking* for the presence of Christ. Go out into the world and live in ways that *bear witness to* the presence of Christ that is *over* us and *in* us and *all around* us. *Be* the miracle that someone else is looking for.