

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Ascension – June 2nd, 2011

Colossians 3:1-4

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Dear children of our heavenly Father,

There are so many things in this world to be afraid of. We label many of these fears as phobias, and there are all kinds of phobias. If you are someone who pulls your pillow tight over your head and cowers beneath the bed sheets when a bad storm rolls in, you might have *brontophobia*; the fear of lightning and thunder. If you are someone who screams and runs away when a creepy crawler scuttles across the floor, you might have *arachnophobia*; the fear of spiders. If you've ever screamed the words, "Don't look down!" you might have *acrophobia*, an extreme or irrational fear of heights.

In our text for today the Apostle Paul writes to the Christians living in Colosse and says to them, "Don't look down!" And it's not because the members of this church were skyscraper window washers. The apostle said these words because these Christians were fixated on worldly things instead of concentrating on heavenly things. The disciples suffered from this phobia, too, didn't they? You might recall the request that James and John had of Jesus, "**Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.**" (Mark 10:37) These two faithful disciples of Jesus looked forward to the glory of heaven, but their motive was very worldly. In the midst of all this fear, we find the words of Paul to bring us comfort this Ascension day.

Theme: Do Not Let Your Heart Be Troubled!

- 1. Don't look down to this world**
- 2. Look Up to Jesus**

The apostle Paul says to you and me, "**Set your hearts on things above, not on earthly things.**" (vs1,2) The verb tense that Paul uses in the Greek indicates continuing action, "Keep searching for heavenly things. Continue to fix your attention on heavenly things." As saints bound for heaven we look at the people of this sinful world and witness just the opposite, especially in our own country. Sadly, I don't think that too many people of this wealthy nation of ours are in a support group for sufferers of *hylephobia*; the fear of materialism. America embraces materialism. If we're honest with ourselves, even we as Christians allow the eyes of our hearts and minds to gaze at this earth with its riches and concerns.

Your homes are stuffed with electronic gadgets, hunting equipment, appliances, collectables and your hobbies; models, baseball cards, stamps, scrapbooking and candles. Garages and sheds are filled with numerous outdoor activities; camping equipment, yard equipment, fishing equipment, woodworking and mechanic tools. These worldly possessions keep our gaze fixed down instead of up. We spend much time, money and energy searching for more.

Not only do we allow the eyes of our minds and hearts to become glued on the things of this world, but when it comes to spiritual and emotional issues we have a tendency to look down. Most of you have problems in your lives right now, some big, some small. The struggle with finances; a relationship that is not where you would like it to be, whether with your spouse, child or a friend; health issues; the business of the work life; a faith that feels weak and battered. Instead of looking up to heaven for help, even for the little anxieties in life, we often scour the earth to solve the problem. We even turn to ourselves, or a pill or the bottom of a bottle for escape, and when we do look to heaven it's to cast blame.

As you and I run back and forth on this earth chasing after this or that, eventually we'll find that we've dug ourselves a nice deep trench. Why is it that you and I don't look heavenward more often? Why are we so obsessed with the things of this world? Is it because eternal life, salvation, forgiveness, faith and spiritual growth are things that we can't always see, touch, taste and smell? Or is it that this infatuation with earthly things is implanted into our very being?

Our lesson ends with verse four, but in the very next verse the apostle Paul talks about **your earthly nature**. There's a natural part of you that has been with you since your conception that has kept you from looking upward. Because of this sinful earthly nature, Paul says, that the **wrath of God** is coming upon us. Yet Paul tells you that you will not live according to that earthly nature. Instead, he says that you will continue to seek heavenly things and you will contemplate on heavenly ideas. How can this be possible when your earthly nature encourages you to look down, not up? Very bluntly, Paul says, "**You died.**" (vs3) Your sinful earthly nature died. In the previous chapter Paul explains, "**[You were] buried with him.**" (2:12) Jesus involved all in his death. His death was the world's death to the sinful earthly self. "**One died for all, and therefore all died,**" Paul says in 2Cor 5:14. Paul goes on to say in chapter two of Colossians, "**[You were] buried with him in baptism.**" The Holy Spirit applied Christ's death to you personally by drowning your sinful, earthly nature in the waters of Holy Baptism, thereby putting your sinful nature to death. And all of your failures for not always seeking heavenly things and all of your sins of constantly chasing after earthly things were put to death at your baptism.

But something else happened. In vs1 Paul says, "**You have been raised with Christ.**" If we look at the verb tense that Paul uses in the Greek language he literally says, "This one time action has been completed for you: you were raised to live again together with Christ." Not only did your Living Redeemer include you in his death, but also in his resurrection. He gives it to you personally, again, through the Sacrament of baptism. Paul describes that new life in vs3, "**Your life is now hidden with Christ.**" Where is Christ? Paul says in vs2, "**Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.**" There's your new life, in heaven, with your ascended Lord Jesus. That's the safest place it could be; in the hands of the one who now sits at the right hand of God, the position of power and authority over all nations and kings and spiritual powers.

This is why Paul says, "Don't look down! Look up!" Look at what you have there! Paul continues to describe this new life of yours in vs4, "**When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**" When the final trumpets sound the dead will be called from their graves. Those who have died in the Lord along with us who are still alive will undergo a wonderful transformation will take over your corpse. Paul describes this change in Philippians 3:21, "**He will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.**" Imagine having a body that is completely immune to allergies, asthma, the flu, cataracts, bad backs and cancer. Imagine having a body that will never lose strength due to lack of sleep, arthritis or fibromyalgia. Imagine having a body that will never be influenced by a sinful, earthly nature, a body that will never be subject to death. You don't have to imagine it, it's yours already. Why look down? Look up! Look at your new life!

Medical studies say that individuals who overcome an addiction feel as if they are living a new life. The smoking, drugs, or alcohol no longer control their bodies. However, these individuals, who, even decades after they have left their addiction, still daily contend with the demons of past cravings. While it is true that Christ put our sinful, earthly nature to death to secure our eternity in heaven, we must still contend with the sinful, earthly nature, because it will not leave our bodies until it is laid to rest in our graves. But in the previous chapter (2:11,12), the apostle Paul tells you to put off your sinful, earthly nature through baptism. You will do this by daily saying to yourself, "I have sinned. But I have been baptized. My sins and sinful desires have been put to death with Christ. I have been raised with Christ to a new life with him in glory and new life here on earth." When you daily confess this, your sinful nature will be rendered powerless. You will put behind you your life of constantly looking down. Instead you will look up.

Looking heavenward is what we do collectively as a congregation. That's what you're doing right now, isn't it? Sitting attentively at the feet of Jesus, listening to his promises; That is what we do as wait eagerly for the Lord's Supper, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that waits for you; faithfully attending Bible study, increasing your knowledge of God's Word, equipping yourself for service in his kingdom here on earth. You set your hearts and minds on things above when you seek to strengthen one another. You're doing that right now, gathering together as people united in the one true faith; when you sing hymns and psalms you are proclaiming to each other the wonders Christ has done. Encourage each other to be faithful in worship and Bible Study and pray for each other. We are looking upward when we seek the unchurched. You do that when you invite your friends and coworkers to hear God's Word.

Look up, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, where your new life is hidden, kept safe for you. As you do that, you will look down at your earthly possessions in a different way, "How can I use these blessings so that my focus is heavenward?" I can support my congregation with generous offerings now, or I can include my congregation in my estate planning, so that while I am enjoying my new life in heaven, my wealth will continue to support the saints on earth as they point folks to heaven. As you deal with the problems in your life don't look down. Look up, where Jesus is. Listen to what he promised you before he ascended into heaven, "**I am with you always, to the very end of the age.**" No matter how big or how little your problems or anxieties, tell your ascended High Priest about them. He is the one who takes your prayers to the Father. And your Heavenly Father loves you. He will act. Allow him to do that. Stop looking down at yourself or to other earthly things for help. That's how you set your hearts and minds on things above. And these are the things you will do, the apostle Paul says, because you have been raised with Christ.

At this time of year students might say they have *testophobia*; the fear of taking tests. None of you better say you have *homilophobia*; the fear of sermons. Studies show that the majority of people have *glossophobia*; the fear of public speaking. One thing you never have to fear is death, or the problems in your life, or where you'll spend eternity. You have died with Christ, been raised with him, and your new life is kept safe with him in heaven, where he reigns forever. So keep looking up. Amen.