

Stephen Hawking was a physicist-mathematician-cosmologist with a longer than alphabet soup list of credentials on his business card than any living human. One would probably need an advanced degree just to understand Hawking's areas of research. He also wrote a great deal of books, including the international best-seller *A Brief History of Time*. And whenever the boundaries of human potential were discussed, a sound bite from Hawking was almost always a certainty. From human space flight, to alien life, to theoretical physics, Hawking came up with a lot of mind-blowing ideas.

Before he died he was theorizing that someday humanity would need *to* abandon earth or face extinction. To quote the theoretical physicist, "It will be difficult enough to avoid disaster on planet Earth in the next hundred years, let alone the next thousand, or million. The human race shouldn't have all its eggs in one basket, or on one planet." Hawking said we need to get the heck out of here. Find a new planet to colonize. Start from scratch without the mess we've made. And given all of the hoopla happening in the world these days, some people are probably thinking he may have been right.

Even Christians might agree with Hawking in one sense, thinking the earth is doomed and what's required now is the patience to wait until we can someday punch our ticket to heaven and move to a "new creation." A better place is waiting, and there's no mess there! And yet, in a *Time* magazine interview, theologian N.T. Wright counters that line of thought, saying, "Never at any point do the gospels, or Paul, say Jesus has been raised, therefore we are all going to heaven. They all say, Jesus is raised, therefore the new creation has begun, and we have a job to do."

So, with all due respect to Hawking, perhaps instead of waiting to abandon the earth for someplace better, Jesus would say Christians should *advance* rather than *abandon* the earth. In other words, we should develop and nurture the earth into someplace better.

In our Gospel lesson we witness what we in the church fondly call Ascension Day, as the disciples of Christ watch as Jesus apparently does what Hawking suggests: He shoots up and off into the heavens, disappearing from view, in an exit that would make David Blaine and Criss Angel envious, apparently abandoning the earth and his disciples walking on it. But did he actually abandon them? No way! Of course not!

For Jesus' disciples, the ascension was a powerful catalyst to get them to work on the mission Jesus had left them. The days prior to Jesus' murder had been brutal for them. They scattered and hid out. Imagine the confusion and despair. Were their last three years a big mistake? If they weren't killed, too, what would they do next? Fish again? Collect taxes?

But the resurrection changed everything. The disciples' mission was on again. The opening question of our Acts text makes perfect sense: "Lord, is this the

time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" His response, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." echoes the sentiments of the prophets before him. Israel had always been a bit too narrow-minded. They forgot, on more than one occasion, that Abraham's *blessing* was to go to *all people*! They consistently failed to remember that the temple was for *all nations*! They were passionate about being God's people in God's land, but often neglected God's mission and justice. Jesus was perfectly clear in his last earthly words: advance the gospel to the ends of the earth!

And then, Jesus appears to do what Hawking suggests we prepare to do: get out while the getting's good. Which begs the question, did his disciples think that somehow Jesus was taking off and leaving a mess behind for them to clean up? How could they *not* feel completely abandoned? And yet, while the disciples kept craning their necks toward the sky, like it was a rocket launch, angels appeared to them in order to get their gaze back on the earth. He'll come back from the skies just like he left, they said. Now stop staring! There's work to be done.

The ascension must have been a stunning spectacle to see. But more amazing than Christ's departure was the unlikely lot with whom he left the mission to. They grew up cleaning fish and collecting taxes - not as religious leaders. They'd misunderstood parables. Fought over who was the greatest. Fell asleep in the garden. Denied Jesus in his last days. They'd only just begun to *fully* understand the life and mission of Christ over the last 40 days he had spent with them after his Resurrection, when he "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." Humanly speaking, perhaps the disciples weren't the best choice to advance the good news.

But the ascension was powerful! We can think of it as the hinge of the ap-ah-stol-ik mission. Take the Resurrection and Pentecost. The hinge holding the two together was the Lord's ascension. It told the disciples that Jesus' mission was now their mission. And that made an impact! Far from feeling abandoned, they felt empowered. His mission was now theirs and in response they continued to praise God in the temple, waiting for Pentecost. The ascension had a counterintuitive effect. Jesus didn't abandon his disciples. Instead, for the first time, they took ownership of his mission.

Ascension Sunday is a time to reflect on how *we* can partner with Jesus in life and faith. Do we have a clear sense of having some kind of personal mission? Do we feel empowered as we should? Do we see the gospel as church work, or as our vocation? Let me offer up four brief implications from our narrative on Christian living.

First of all, *It's on us*. Certainly the disciples could have come up with plenty of excuses to avoid the mission that was set before them? Like them, don't we have a lot of excuses as to why we can't answer the call to ministry and service? Perhaps

it's, "I haven't been a Christian long enough," or "I'm not trained or haven't been to seminary," or "Someone might ask a question I can't answer" or "I don't have enough time because of my job, family, or..... fill-in-the-blank." But then, like now, imperfect people are God's primary plan - not a backup plan - for sharing the gospel.

2nd *we aren't alone*. The disciples were told they would have Help. They just needed to go to Jerusalem and wait for it. As post-Pentecost Christians, we have been given the same Spirit that the disciples received in Acts 2. That means our limitations, like theirs, need not stand in the way. We are in a partnership. Paul didn't go preaching with persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the power of the Spirit. We're no different in our gifts and passions. We need to understand our mission as a *partnership* with God's Spirit. We aren't alone..... So let's pray with purpose and with the Spirit's help let's try to imagine where we see God working and how we can join God at work in the world.

This... then... leads us to our third implication for Christian living, *the time is now*. The angels issued a clear warning that we rarely think about: Jesus is coming back the same way he left. After 2,000 plus years, it's quite easy for us to not take that seriously. It doesn't appear that he will be coming back anytime soon because Jesus has been gone a long time. In fact, one might say that Christ's return can feel a bit like hitting the lotto - chances are it won't happen in our lifetime. But the Apostle James reminds us that our life is like a mist that comes and then vanishes. So if we know the good we ought to do, and don't do it, we sin. So what exactly are we waiting for?

Finally, the whole earth has needs. Jesus wouldn't let the disciples be content with Israel alone. They were to go out to Samaria and the ends of the earth. All Christians have natural spheres of influence around them, and we can find need in every one of those places. Too much sky-staring Christianity may have soured Hawking. Comparing the impacts of science and religion, he once said, "There is a fundamental difference between religion, which is based on authority, [and] science, which is based on observation and reason. Science will win because it works."

Science works! Hawking saw it advancing us to the point where we can abandon this place for new planets. But: * What if he had seen a religion that worked? * What if he had experienced a faith that worked!? * What if he had observed something that made an impact? * What if he had witnessed something that was transformative and life-changing? * What if he had discovered something that addressed the world's urgent needs and problems? * What if he had come up a solution that made abandoning earth an unnecessary idea?

It is that kind of Christianity that the ascension calls us to. And while we can serve God in many ways, we *can't* do it by simply staring at the sky and hanging

out. Ascension Day is a natural time to take a look at our spheres of influence and ask, "Am I *helping to advance the Kingdom of God* or am I in the process of *abandoning* my calling?" Amen.