

THE EMPTY STARE  
[Written in oral form]

A little over a month ago, I took my watch in for repair. It has a life-time guarantee, so they shipped it away to be fixed.

Until I got it back, I noticed that, periodically throughout the day, I would glance at my wrist,.....as if my watch was there.

I would look at my wrist with the weirdest, unsatisfied, bewildered sensation.

?Have you ever done that? Such as relocate a clock in your house, and find yourself staring at a blank space on the wall? Or maybe it's reaching in a cupboard for an item that you moved weeks ago???

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A situation in today's text presents the same experience.

The Bible is fascinating because it often presents people reacting so authentically, revealing **our** true nature.

As we should, we look to the Bible for spiritual inspiration, to learn more about how to grow in relationship with God...and for life lessons. Yet, the Bible is also mysterious and perplexing, too.

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Luke is credited as the author of the Book of Acts. He addresses his book to the unknown Theophilus. Theophilus and his inclusion is a mystery.

The passage also states that Jesus went around for 40 days, after the resurrection, proving his existence and teaching his followers.

40 days? What's with 40 day's? Another mystery.

Moses was on Mt Sinai for 40 days.

Elijah hid for 40 days, and Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days.

We can only guess at the significance.....

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Then there is verse 5, that has Jesus seemingly ending baptism by water, to be replaced by the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever his intent, the church chose to keep the water baptism.

Another interesting mystery is Luke has two different ascension stories. The first one, in the Gospel of Luke, places Jesus in Bethany with a few close friends. The Acts account stresses that he was in Jerusalem where he told the disciples to wait for him there.

Moreover, Luke noted that post resurrection Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God. This inclusion makes it important, yet we don't have a clear picture of what IS the kingdom of God. Jesus usually explained it with similes, saying "the Kingdom of God is like....."

We have good images, but no detailed explanation, and thus this is another mystery.

I mention all this so that we have a better idea of what the Bible is doing and how to use the Biblical stories.

Many of the stories, such as today's, draw us in with a very human connecting point, such as **staring at nothing**, YET we often are Not given detailed explanations and ...the ones we do have are vague, inconsistent and mysterious.

Therefore, let us remember that, and lift up the broad lessons that challenge us to live by faith,.....and not focus so much on the facts or contributing details. Let us find inspiration instead of answers.

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The ascension in Acts presents Jesus directing his followers to expect the empowerment of the holy spirit and to be Witnesses to all the world. Then, Jesus is lifted up in a cloud and disappears. In the OT, a cloud symbolized God. Thus, God lifted up Jesus and removed him from sight.

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Then, the group just stood and stared at what was not there. It was a dumb, empty stare. Perhaps, they were in shock,... in denial,...in despair...or just dumbfounded. ???  
Regardless, they froze and forgot Jesus' message.

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I imagine that God was thinking "Good Grief"; I better send a couple of angels to tell them it's time to move on; it's time for the new."

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I can easily envision them staring up with an empty look. Perhaps, in grief or not knowing exactly what to do. It's as if they are stuck/frozen in the past--the wonderful past when Jesus was present with them. They were staring at what once was but is not longer.

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The church today, for the most part, has taken on an Empty Stare.  
Most churches are frozen--gazing at the past glory days that no longer exist.  
Many try harder doing what used to work, and become frustrated and perplexed by the failures.

There was a time when the majority of people went to church, and most of the others felt they should. There was a time when a church could put up a sign, open their doors and people would come on their own.

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Well, that reality is gone. We in North America are entering the post Christian era. Great Britain and Europe are already there.

It is rare for the curious to visit a church, and rarer still for God seekers to try church attendance. Our marquee sign out front is merely a memento of the past. Churches are declining and closing, and inner cities are marked by cathedrals and relic churches turned into condos.  
Waterloo North is not an exception; we grew at the cost to others.

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Recently, I have enjoyed two opportunities to listen to Stuart Murray. He is the author of many books, including "The Naked Anabaptist."  
Stuart Murray is British.  
Murray provided numerous examples of what a post-Christendom culture looks like. He noted that most people have no idea what a Bible is and know nothing about Jesus. Many can not name the person hanging on a cross in front of an abandoned Catholic church.

At MCEC assembly, last Saturday, he talked about how to deal with this new reality. Churches have to change because no longer is "church" or Jesus a known or attractive concept.

Murray stressed that Christianity is now a minority in popular culture, yet worse off than a typical minority.

Christianity is a minority with a memory of being a majority.

He said that memory can make us frustrated, bitter and stagnant.

That is a condition much like the disciples staring up at the empty past.

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This all sounds gloomy.....if our context is people fixated on the memory of being in the majority.

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The new reality is that a minority in culture is free to be creative, prophetic and hopeful. A minority group finds ways to thrive, BUT we must accept the new reality and let go of the past.

Murray presented a key question to ponder:

What are we hoping for--Christ in the world or the old Christian ways?

Our hope is in the Risen Christ and the power of God's Spirit. **Period.**

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Some other suggestions Murray proposed are:

We must take the long term view. There are no quick results. The energized churches in England are discovering it takes 10-15 years of contact and nurturing before someone joins a church.

Another is: we must embrace a spirit of gratitude verses blaming and grumbling.

Another: the church today can disrupt popular culture with wonder and hope,.....then slowly, patiently teach about Jesus to those who find relationship within the church.

He shared a slogan from one church there. It is: We will outlast, out suffer, out hinder all that opposes Christ.

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There is a strong parallel of our situation to what the followers of Christ faced when Jesus left them.

Those disciples weren't sure how to grow, in a hostile environment, what would become the church.

However, they were told what to do.

"What to do" is the message from the text that we must hold onto.

They had to go out in faith....trusting in God's Spirit and not their own abilities.

AND, they were to bear witness to their relationship with God through Christ, to All people.

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I think we need fewer answers, and we can ignore whatever "cure-all" solution the organized church sells us.

We need fewer programs,.....and much more faith in the power of God's Spirit.

In addition, WE Must Bear witness to those outside the church.

Each of us, must bear witness to what God is doing in our lives.

We must tell our stories, constantly, about how Christ is changing us.

And, to be sure, we must stop the empty stare and move on.