

Acts | Just look around!

Family@10, 17 May 2026

Alison Sampson, reflecting on Acts 1:6-14

There he was, living and walking and eating among us. There he was, hanging on a cross. And there he was, among us once again and explaining the scriptures and breaking bread. And then he simply ... disappeared.

Again and again people say that God is absent. A woman dies, her children are young: where is God? A longed-for baby is stillborn: where is God? Relationships break down, corporations rule, good soil is turned to dust: and where, where is God? We've just heard the story of the Ascension, that time when the Risen Christ in the form of Jesus left his disciples once and for all. So where is God? Well, it seems that God has left the planet, and we are left with nothing at all.

And we are left with nothing because, more than two thousand years after Jesus' life on earth, many of us are still waiting for a messiah, that is, some god in a flaming chariot to come charging down from the sun and save us. And so we stand shading our eyes looking to the skies, and we wait.

And while we wait, things go to pieces around us. The poor go hungry, widows are lonely, and families fall apart: and we wait. Years of neoliberal policy entrench intergenerational poverty while building a toxic billionaire class: and we wait. Politicians wage war on women, journalists, queer folk and truth: and we wait. Seas rise, forests are cleared, mass extinctions take place: and we wait. While we look to the sky seeking a saviour, our church buildings crumble and our numbers dwindle and our faith begins to shrivel up, and every now and then we glance around and wonder where all the people are. And still ... we wait.

There's nothing strange about this behaviour. People have been waiting for a messiah for thousands of years; even the first disciples stood looking up to heaven. We're in good company.

And yet to stand and wait and keep on waiting is not Christian. We enact the Christian journey through the liturgical year, and this gazing at the sky is one teeny-tiny step in the journey. But we take this step living in a post-Ascension, post-Pentecost age, and so we know a thing or two.

For example, we know that the first disciples were tremendously lucky. Not only did they meet the man Jesus; they weren't burdened by the tail end of

Christendom. They didn't inherit this messy violent history and tradition and doctrine and hierarchies and buildings and abuses and Christian nationalism and biblical womanhood and everything else. Instead, they were inventing things as they went along.

So they took their history of faith, and their memories of the person they had loved, and the stories about the Risen One they had encountered, and they wrestled with it all and prayed together and shared their meals and lives. And all these stories and encounters and praying and sharing whizzed around in some metaphysical blender and poured out as love into the world. Under the crushing weight of the Roman Empire, while the powers and principalities raged around them, they got busy loving and serving and feeding people; and as those of us who read Acts will know, their lives were filled with wonders.

But they didn't become this way by standing on a hillside, peering up into the sky. They weren't made powerful by passively expecting a messiah to fix everything. People around them weren't fed and healed, and loving communities weren't formed, because they sat around waiting for Jesus' return. Instead, all these things happened when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they responded with confidence and joy: for then the world was filled, absolutely filled, with an explosion of the presence of God. And this presence wasn't a sun-god in golden robes, nor was it a powerful political leader or a charismatic guru in personal growth. Instead it was God poured into them and among them and through them and out into the world as love.

Ever since, groups of Jesus-followers have been called to be the body of Christ, bringing good news to the vulnerable and mercy for all, and sharing their lives in love. Yet it seems that much of the church has missed the point. We have good, very good news, yet it seems that much of the church is more invested in maintaining its boundaries and caring for itself than in giving its life away. But as followers of Jesus, we should be different. Because we know is Pentecost. We know that the Holy Spirit is given to those who believe, and that it comes in power to inflame us with passion, that we might bear witness to the gospel in word and deed, in all that we say and do.

Of course, there is no doubt that we are frail. We get scared and overwhelmed and angry and anxious. When we gather in groups, we can intensify this, and a huddle of scared angry anxious people is a miserable thing. It's a harsh judgement just waiting to happen; it's a grabbing of resources to protect its own life; it's an embodiment of the myth of scarcity.

But this is the behaviour of people who are defensive, people who are hurt, people who refuse to see the manna all around them. It's characteristic of lonely people who are aching with the pain of absence and who think God has forgotten them. But although the Risen Jesus ascended into heaven, we know that this is not the end of the story. We know Pentecost, and so we know that we have not been abandoned. The Spirit has been lavished upon the world, and us: and so God is with us, right here, right now, and until the end of time.

And so we don't need another messiah to save us. We don't need to shade our eyes and peer into the sky. We don't need to be worried about provision; we don't need to be anxious and afraid; for when we bless and share what we already have, we find God gives us more than enough. So with confidence and joy, we can join in the miracle; we can embody God's presence in this world.

And since God is love, there's really only one way to do this, and that is to love. It's to band together and offer our gifts and time and resource and companionship for the good and growth of others. Like the earliest disciples, we are to be living proof that God is love, and that God loves and cares for the world. Not just our friends and families; not just the people in this congregation; not just the people like us, but everybody. For God loves the world and the people of the world, just the way they are, and it is our job to accept and embody and share that love in very real and down-to-earth ways.

As followers of Jesus, then, we must turn our gaze earthwards, and outwards. Even after high holy moments, we must walk down the mountain and turn to others with whom we can sing and pray and listen for the Word, and engage in the work of love. For it is through other people that we learn to extend ourselves for the sake of another. It is through other people that God's gifts are given and shared. And it is through other people that we catch glimpses of the One we most deeply long for.

The man Jesus is gone. But in words of truth and power, in healing touch, in bread and wine and self-giving service, we glimpse the Risen Christ, our Saviour, in others. We see that we have not been abandoned, we are not alone, and God is with us even now, through the gift and challenge of other people.

So if you want to encounter your beloved Jesus again, don't stand there peering into heaven. Come down from the mountain and look around, my friends. Just look around. Ω