

Ascension of the Lord, May 9, 2013: Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

What is it those angels invite us to see on the earth from the Mount of Olives?

by [Barbara Rossing](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue

The Augusta Victoria Hospital sits on the highest point of the Mount of Olives, one of the sites claimed to be the place from which Jesus ascended into heaven. Administered by the Lutheran World Federation, hospital staff serve Palestinians who are living in the midst of occupation. Every day medical personnel and patients navigate Israeli checkpoints and closures to reach this hospital in East Jerusalem, which is renowned for its radiation therapy and pediatric kidney dialysis.

From a church tower on the grounds one can see the Israeli settlement of Ma'ale Adumim and the separation barrier that snakes across the West Bank landscape. Next door is the land known as Area E-1. Palestinians and international governments oppose Israel's plans to build here, as it is the last remaining West Bank land that connects East Jerusalem to the rest of Palestinian territory.

A late 19th-century mosaic on the high apse wall of the hospital's Church of the Ascension portrays the ascending Jesus on a cloud and flanked by two angels. The angels are gazing not up at the ascending Jesus but out toward the congregation. They point both us and the disciples in this text earthward: "Why are you standing looking up toward heaven?" they ask.

The ascension is not about Jesus' absence but about his presence in the world in a new way. Rather than turning our gaze to heaven to await Christ's return on the Mount of Olives, these earthly minded angels turn our gaze out into the world.

Jerusalem plays a crucial role in Luke's narrative. It is the place where the disciples will be clothed with "power from on high." In Acts, Jerusalem is the place from which the risen Jesus' mission goes forth to the ends of the earth. In Luke (unlike Mark and Matthew), the disciples are instructed not to go north to meet the risen Christ, but to stay in the city of Jerusalem and await the Holy Spirit.

The story of the ascension forms a chronological bridge between the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, between the time of Jesus and the time of the church. Luke is the only Gospel writer to distinguish Jesus' ascension from his resurrection as a separate event. Luke actually tells the story twice, once at the end of the Gospel (although some manuscripts lack "and was carried up into heaven" in Luke 24:51) and again at the beginning of Acts. There is an interesting chronological disparity between the two accounts. In Luke 24 Jesus ascends late on Easter Day itself, whereas in Acts 1 his ascension is delayed until "after forty days."

The Luke 24 ascension narrative takes place on the same long Easter Day that saw Jesus walking on the Emmaus road and finally appearing to the disciples in Jerusalem. Like the Emmaus conversation earlier in the day, Jesus' goal is to teach us about the scriptures. As a first theme of the story, he "opened the disciples' minds" to understand the law, the prophets and the psalms—naming all three parts of the Bible—so that they might be witnesses to the fulfillment of God's word.

Blessing is the second important theme of the Lucan story, with the threefold repetition of the word *eulogeō*. Jesus' last act on earth is to raise his hands in blessing over the disciples. As he is blessing them, he is parted from them. His followers then return to Jerusalem where they too are continually "blessing" God.

Acts tells the ascension story both to narrate Jesus' departure and to discourage expectations and speculations about the timetable of Jesus' return. In response to questions of chronology such as the question posed by the disciples, Jesus replies with words that bear repeating today: "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons." Jesus specifically orders the disciples not to try to calculate the date of his return. It's as if he, in concert with those earth-facing angels, believes other things should be occupying our attention in this postresurrection era.

What is it those angels invite us to see on the earth from the Mount of Olives? There's plenty for us to notice. It could be the beauty of the Dead Sea and Jordan River to the east, where John the Baptist baptized people into his renewal movement, or the brown hills and Bedouin tents or Palestinian stone homes of E-1, which are threatened with demolition today. Gazing south we see the families traveling circuitous roads from Bethlehem or Beit Jala, braving checkpoints to seek medical care on this mountain. Looking to the west, perhaps we are to take notice of the city of Jerusalem, over which Jesus wept and weeps still, the city that is holy to three faiths often at odds with one another today.

If Jesus' ascension is to have meaning, it must be by way of underscoring Jesus' presence still on earth. And that is through us. The ascension unexpectedly turns our gaze earthward—to the medical care on this holy site at Augusta Victoria Hospital, and beyond, to every place on earth where God's people work as agents of hope and healing in the midst of struggle.

Brazilian theologian Vitor Westhelle argues that this is the meaning of the statement of the angels in Acts 1:11—that just as we experienced Jesus first on earth and then departing to heaven, so will we experience him coming again from earth. Earth is the place to look for his presence. The disciples' response to ascension can be ours as well. We return with great joy, “blessing God,” and then set out in ministry.