

Why are you looking up?

By [Kenneth H. Carter Jr.](#)

May 18, 2009

We are in the interim between Easter and Pentecost. Of course, we live in an interim in other ways: we anticipate graduations, new jobs, the resolution of dilemmas. In the U.S., it is as if we are suspended between an old world--a disintegrating empire--and the emergence of something new. Phyllis Tickle [writes](#) about this possibility specifically for the church.

The first followers of Jesus lived in an interim time. In the beginning of Acts, the risen Lord instructs the disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. This they do for 40 days, recalling Moses on the mountain, receiving the law and experiencing the glory of the Lord.

"Lord," they ask Jesus, "is this the time that your kingdom is going to come?"

"No," Jesus says, "it is not for you to know that. . . . But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses."

Then Jesus ascends to heaven, and two men in white robes ask the disciples, "Why are you looking up to heaven? He is going to come back!"

In his commentary on the ascension, Peter Gomes insists that the event has both an upward vision and a downward vision. The upward vision is heaven: "I go to prepare a place for you." Amidst the troubles of this world, we want to be lifted up--we need an upward vision.

But there is also the downward vision, expressed in the question, "Why are you looking up toward heaven?" In other words, there is more to do. Put your hand to the plow, be faithful and the Lord will return. Immerse yourself in the daily life of this world.

As a college student, I had a part-time job as a youth director of an inner-city Methodist church in the deep South. There were about 100 of us: 75 people age 75

and older who had built the church, and 25 people under age 25 who lived nearby. There was no one in his or her 30s, 40s, 50s or 60s. The church had missed almost two generations.

At the beginning of the service, the song leader would take requests from the Cokesbury hymnal. Invariably, a senior adult would request "Victory in Jesus." I would think to myself, "These folks just want to escape. Their church is dying, and they're singing about streets of gold beyond the crystal sea."

I would later see it from a different perspective: these were the builders and the sustainers of this church. They loved the youth even though they were not related to them by family ties. They were teaching me and the others the importance of an upward vision.

Yet the downward vision remains: the work of the church goes on, as the needs of the world persist and the poor are always with us. Like all Christian ideas, the ascension must relate to what life is like on the ground. As one of my favorite seminary professors would say, "Tell me who takes out the garbage, and I will tell you about your theology." We live in the interim, gripped by both an upward and a downward vision. Whether we're singing "Victory in Jesu" or taking out the garbage, a voice inside asks us, "Why are you looking up to heaven?"