

He isn't here, he's everywhere (Acts 1:1-11)

The disciples' wonder and confusion at Jesus' ascension is a comfort to us.

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One of my favorite pieces of folk art is Sara Olson-Smith's watercolor painting *Ascension*. Olson-Smith is a gifted pastor as well as a creative artist whose drawings, paintings, and fiber arts evoke the radical joy that erupts from mountaintop experiences after a time in the valleys of deep sorrow. This painting is no exception.

Filling the frame is a row of disciples, visible only from the waist down, standing upon a grassy mound, presumably the Mount of Olives. Sturdy legs appear beneath vibrantly colored robes, as if those garments were brightened by proximity to the one who is light to all who sit in darkness. Sandals on every foot suggest miles traveled over pathways below, guided into the way of peace during the days and months before.

The garments, their colors, those feet: all of it together evokes the joy to be found during 40 days and a mountaintop experience in the presence of one who was once dead and buried, but now, even now, is very much alive.

A trail of footprints marks each disciple's unique path up the hillside, as if they all had scrambled to the top at the same time, but each one by a slightly different route.

One set of footprints differs from the others. Their shape is clearly marked and easy to see—these are not the faint and misty prints long forgotten or faded by wind-blown dust—but the body to which the feet belong is nowhere visible among the figures in the painting.

Whenever I view this painting or read the Acts account of Jesus' ascension into heaven, I smile to myself as I imagine the disciples standing there, mouths open, staring up into the sky and saying to one another, "Wait. Did you see what I just saw?! Surely he'll come back, right? What do we do now?"

Imagining their wonder mixed with confusion comforts me. After all, if the people who had direct experiences of Jesus could still question the meaning of those experiences, as they often did during his earthly ministry, then there is space for our own questions today.

According to Acts, two angels suddenly appear on the mountainside while the disciples are gazing into the clouds. "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" they ask. In its content, if not its words, their question echoes the angels' joyful message at the empty tomb: He is not here!

Jesus' absence from their sight suggests that he is no longer constrained by earth's gravity, nor timebound in history, nor limited by human finitude. Even death cannot hold him, for he is God's own Messiah, raised to the right hand of God and present with his followers through power poured out through the Holy Spirit.

He is not here, for he is everywhere. And that is reason enough to join the disciples in worship and prayer, whether from the top of a mountain or on the flat places below, and in every moment and place in between.