

Gone Up, Not Gone Away

Luke 24:44-53
May 29, 2022 / Ascension Sunday

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Preached for *A Sermon for Every Sunday*

In our larger culture, this is of course, Memorial Day weekend. We know this primarily because of all the mattress sales that are taking place. Apparently, nothing says “we remember” like 40% off a queen-sized pillow-top.

For those of us who try to be a bit more thoughtful, we give God thanks for those brave souls who gave their lives in defense of our nation. And those of us in the church have something in addition to celebrate this weekend. Today is Ascension Sunday, which is always the last Sunday in the Season of Easter.

Next Sunday will be Pentecost—the birthday of the church. Many of us will celebrate by reading together the story from Acts where the believers are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, symbolized by fire in that great story. Some churches even ask their parishioners to dress in the colors of fire—red, orange, yellow—to “embody” the story. And I know a few churches who will enjoy birthday cake in the Fellowship Hall after worship. Pentecost is always a great celebration.

But that is next week. Today is Ascension Sunday. This is the day we remember Jesus’ ascension back into heaven after his earthly ministry was complete.

When my older daughter Ella was young, she would often have trouble falling asleep. As you can imagine, the cause of her insomnia had to do with the darkness of her bedroom. But perhaps unlike most children, in order for Ella fall asleep, she required

her room to be pitch-black. And if it's weren't, Ella would holler down the hallway, "help! Help! The light is coming under the door!"

My younger daughter Ashley, however, developed two things at the same time: a fear of the dark and an active imagination. Not a great combination. She would imagine all sorts of scary things that could happen once the lights went out. The only way to guard against such things was to stay awake and keep lookout.

Eventually, my wife or I would come sit with her until she fell asleep. I can remember on more than one occasion Ashley just begins to drift off, and is then jolted awake again, calling out, "Are you still there?" "Yes, honey, I'm still here. Now go to sleep."

Letting go and saying goodbye—is hard. Whether giving up a stuffed animal or moving beyond a childhood fear—saying goodbye to that is hard.

No matter what it is, saying goodbye.

I can't tell you how many times I've stood behind the pulpit for a memorial service or beside a freshly dug grave, and I've thought to myself, "I don't want to be here."

Please don't get me wrong—I love being a pastor, and I am grateful that my church has invited me to stand alongside them at such difficult times—times when we help to usher our loved ones through that sacred transition from this life to the next. Even though I'm honored to be present for that, the truth is, I'm just not ready to say goodbye.

My wife and I are preparing to say goodbye in a few months as Ella, whom I just told you about, is headed to Wake Forest University as a freshman. We are incredibly excited for her, but saying goodbye is going to be rough.

Over the past few years due to this awful pandemic, we have had to say goodbye to vacations, weddings, seeing people's full faces, evenings out, in-person worship, careers. And most tragically, we have had to say goodbye to family and friends behind masks and with six feet of distance, unable to share hugs, handshakes, casseroles, and those other healing rituals we offer to one another.

You'd think that saying goodbye would get easier over time, but I haven't found that to be the case. Saying goodbye reminds us just how fragile life can be, and it sometimes causes us to wonder if we are truly alone in this world.

Everything was about to change for the disciples. They had given up their careers and their families to follow Jesus. And they *literally* followed him. Tagging along as he preached and taught, as he fed 5,000 people with a young boy's sack lunch, as he opened the eyes of the blind and turned the leper's skin clean. And they had come to rely upon Jesus for everything.

And then one day, he just...left. As the Bible puts it, Jesus *ascended into heaven*. This event is what today, Ascension Sunday, asks us to remember.

I imagine that as difficult as it was at times, being one of the first disciples of Jesus was wonderful too. Imagine having a front row seat to watching a paralyzed person brought before Jesus, only to see, moments later, that person rising from her mat and skipping all the way home. Imagine walking alongside Jesus after his resurrection as people all over town began to recognize him and then watching the look on their faces as they realize what that might mean. Surely they didn't want it to end. But it did.

The way Luke tells it, Jesus lifted his hands to bless his disciples. And as he was blessing them, he was carried up into heaven...and then he was gone.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: “Jesus disappeared, vanishing into the fog like the end of a dream too good to be true.”¹

In the book of Acts, which Luke writes as a sort of sequel to his gospel, he elaborates on the disciples’ reactions. In the accompanying Lectionary reading for today, we read: “When [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two people in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘You Galileans, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?’”

In other words, quit looking up. Instead, start looking around. Start looking ahead, start looking toward the work we know we must do.

I believe it’s important to recognize that Jesus didn’t really *leave* his disciples that day. That is, he may have gone up, but he has not gone away.

Jesus departed from that one place so that he could be Christ in every place. He departed from them in that moment so he could be Christ for everyone and forever. And with the power Jesus promises them, he doesn’t want his disciples (and us) to stare at heaven to which he just ascended. He wants us to look around us, to the needs and opportunities around us...and get on with it; to continue the ministry he has taught us to do.

I believe this is as important now as it has ever been. Remembering the Ascension of Jesus may be a timely blessing for us as we seek to claw our way out of

¹ *Gospel Medicine*, p. 80.

the pandemic, as we grieve the war in Ukraine, as we experience inflation which is causing hardship on so many. In the midst of all this, we need to be reminded that Jesus has not left us. He may have gone up, but he has gone away. Christ has not left us and we have not been abandoned. Jesus has given us his love and power and presence to carry on in his name... and that is what we will do.

Despite all the illness and death and pain and goodbyes all around us, we do not give up hope. We are still Christ's church and this world needs the church now more than ever. In the name of Jesus Christ, we will continue the good work we know how to do: feed the hungry, care for the poor, pray for the sick, weep with those who are grieving, and love those who are dying.

Many people are so hard on the church these days. And I get it...some of that criticism is warranted. But for those of us still in the church, working day in and day out to help her reflect the love and grace God has given us, we need to be reminded, by the power of Christ's spirit, God is still with us. We are still here, we will be faithful, and we have work to do.

So today, on Ascension Sunday, let us lift our hearts and lift our voices, united in praise of the One who has promised never to abandon us, and who walks with us every step of life's journey.

And then, as we go forth, let us never forget that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and lifted him to heaven, that is the same power inside of us, enabling and empowering us to serve this world in Christ's name.

And that is what we will do. Amen.

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