

## **Gazing Up Toward Heaven – May 17, 2015**

**Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53**

**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**

This past Thursday was a holiday on the Christian calendar. I wonder how many of us celebrated it – or even acknowledged it? Probably few to none. Now I wasn't raised in the church, so I never really learned which are the important holy days and which days are, eh, not so much. I mean come on, we have Transfiguration Sunday, Epiphany, and we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, and we have Ash Wednesday and Good Friday – so why no Ascension Thursday?

Back when I started as a pastor at my first church in Edinburgh, Indiana, I decided to have the very first Ascension Thursday worship service. We had prayer meetings on Thursday nights anyway, so I put together the liturgy and music. It was, in the history of that church, probably the first time that Ascension Thursday was ever celebrated. And, it was also the last time we ever celebrated the Ascension on the actual day. For whatever reason, the Protestant churches don't really pay much attention to this particular event, outside of mentioning it in the recitation of the Apostles' Creed – "he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

Now the event itself is rather strange. Luke shares the story twice – once at the end of the gospel of Luke and also again at the beginning of the Book of Acts. Now, if we were to compare those two stories side by side, you would notice a few discrepancies between them. They don't say exactly the same thing.

And that's okay. I don't think we have to be too concerned about the details. In fact, I don't think Luke was too worried about exactly how it happened. How did Jesus make the transition from walking and talking here on earth to being seated at God's right hand? The how isn't important. It's not even the real point of the story. Instead, I think what's important is the "why" of the story. Why did Luke write about Jesus ascending into heaven? Why did Jesus have to leave his followers and friends, his disciples? I think when we look at that question; we'll have a better chance of discovering the point of the story.

So here's the scene – forty days have passed since Easter Sunday, since the resurrection. Jesus has been with his disciples, talking and teaching and training them. Preparing them for what was to come next. If you are familiar with a number of the popular bible stories, we might know that the number forty is an important number – it represents completion or the end of a time of testing – you've got the 40 days of rain in the story of Noah's Ark, the 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness before reaching the promised land, the 40 days that Jesus was tested and tempted before his ministry began. So 40 days after the Resurrection, Jesus is still with his disciples, but then he removed from the scene.

But before he is taken away, he is still instructing them. He orders them to remain in Jerusalem until they have received the promise of the Holy Spirit, and then he commissions them to be his witnesses, to go out and tell his story, not only in Jerusalem, but in all the world. And finally at this

moment, he is drawn away. And the picture that Luke paints for us is the one in which the disciples are staring up into the sky, watching him until they can no longer see him, but continuing to watch.

It's a poignant moment. And I think it's a paradoxical moment. It's full of raw human emotion, and I don't think it's that hard for us to imagine it. We have all had those times in our lives when we had to say that final goodbye to someone we love. It's an ending, a completion. And I call it paradoxical because I don't think it's simply a sad time. There is certainly the suggestion of grief. The longing gaze into that now empty space. The emptiness we feel. The uncertainty of what comes next. But there is also a hint of something more to come. Promise for the future.

I am sure that all of us here have experienced a moment like this at one or more points in our lives. That juxtaposition of loss with hope. A perfect example of this may be occurring in some of your families. This is a time of graduation. Whether from high school or college. There are a lot of seniors who are trying to juggle these paradoxical feelings. Sadness, grief over having to move on – saying good-bye to people and places that have meant so much to them. They have learned their lessons, and it's time to say goodbye to teachers, professors, coaches, counselors, mentors. And then there's the excitement of taking what they've learned and applying that to something new. They have been equipped and are ready to move forward into the unknown promise of the future.

As Luke describes the scene in the Book of Acts, he doesn't allow the disciples much time for contemplation as they're gazing heavenward. He introduces two men robed in white – angelic figures – who admonish the disciples from their reverie. Don't dwell here too long; you've got work to do. Don't stay too long thinking about the past and what you've lost. Pentecost is coming.

So then back to the original question. Why did Jesus have to leave? Couldn't he have stayed around a little while and helped them to get things moving along? Build a few churches, organize a few committees, attend a few bake sales, or gone on a few mission trips with them? In those early days and weeks, the disciples probably had many questions and concerns. Maybe they were unsure of which way to go or about what to do next. **If he had stayed, they could have asked him what to do.**

And I think here is the answer to our question, why did Jesus have to leave? **If he had stayed, they would have asked him what to do.** We've all seen the image or heard the example of a mother bird kicking her fledglings out of the nest in order to teach them to fly. Now, in my research I could not confirm that this practice is actually true of birds – in fact, most of what I found contradicts that popular image. But the example is certainly used by us humans to illustrate a particular transition. The loving mother bird pushes the awkward adolescent bird out the nest, and as it's falling, it opens its wings and begins to fly. A beautiful symbol of that moment in an adolescent or young adult's maturation process when it's time to move out and thrive on his or her own. We even have a phrase to describe the loneliness that parents feel when all the little birdies have flown away – gone off to college or the military or started work or got married – we call it empty nest syndrome.

We can see the Ascension as that moment – the time when Jesus finally kicked the fledgling disciples out of the nest to fly on their own. He had taught them everything they needed to know. He was the

example for them to follow. And he promised them that they would never be alone. Even with him gone from their physical presence, he promised to send them the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would be their guide and teacher and comforter from now on. And next Sunday, we celebrate Pentecost – the official arrival of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church.

So no matter how the Ascension actually happened, the story itself is a transition. The earthy ministry of Jesus was finally over. He had done everything that he had come to do. His mission was to bring reconciliation to the world. To offer a way for us humans to connect with each other and with God. He redeemed us and gave us new eyes – as the Apostle Paul states – in Christ we are a new creation. So Jesus left with full confidence that his disciples would carry on.

Does that mean they never made mistakes, or never went the wrong way, or never said the wrong things, or they never got discouraged or lost hope or felt doubt? Of course not. History is full of their blunders and stumblings. But they had been changed. Their entire outlook was now infused with the teachings of Jesus Christ. They had a purpose and mission. They had a job to do. To share this message with the entire world. And so, my friends, do we.