

Acts 1: 6-14

The Ascension

We've been taking a look at the book of Acts for a few Sundays now, and I don't know about you but I'm enjoying the book very much.

I have to admit though that I led you astray; I said that the lectionary is taking us through Acts this season, but in fact that's not true. Today it takes us back to chapter one, then next week is chapter two and then it leaves the rest to us. You can remedy this awful oversight by coming to Bible study though!

Today is what we call the ascension. Before we get to the text I want to ask you some "what would you say if" questions.

- 1) Your 5 year old is starting kindergarten today – you take her there, and now is the moment you have to leave her. She's frightened. What is your prayer for her?
- 2) Your son has just been married. He and his new wife are leaving – moving to another country. You're at the wedding reception – waving goodbye. What is your prayer for him
- 3) You have moved your mother into a nursing home. This is the day. She's settled in, you're walking in the parking lot, out to the car,what is your prayer?
- 4) You discover you have a short time to live – you're writing a letter for your family. What is your prayer for them? (Tell Natalie Sleeth story)

Today's readings have to do with leaving, and with what is left behind.

In John, Jesus knows he is about to die, and this whole section is his prayer for those he knows he is about to leave behind.

Although I find John's language confusing sometimes, what I understand Jesus to be praying for is that we'd be one. That we'd stick together. That we'd be one as he and God are one.

This is someone who, facing his own death, gropes for the right way to express the truth that death will not be the end of the relationship, but that in a mysterious and God-like way, there will be a closeness, a participation of one in the other, after death has done its worst.

That is his prayer for them – for us. As he comes close to death. It's beautiful. Read the whole chapter.

In Acts, Jesus is speaking again – this time it's the resurrected Jesus, about to ascend to heaven finally. He tells them not to be concerned about the final times – only God knows how and when that will happen – he tells them to trust God's promise that they would be empowered and filled with the Spirit – able to be witnesses in Jerusalem and all over the world.

(verses 9-11)

They went back to Jerusalem then, spent time in prayer, and if you read on, went about the business of choosing a successor for Judas (remember?)

Doing the ordinary things that needed to get done, while they waited for the promise to be fulfilled.

And it was – in a mighty and amazing way – but that's next week's reading.

Today's reading concerns the between time – Jesus saying goodbye to them – being taken from them, and what they did after that.

The strongest image I have from these readings is: the disciples, staring up into the air at the spot where Jesus had been taken from them. HE'S GONE – and they're still staring. Staring at the sky until...

Vs 10 and 11

Isn't that like Easter morning at the tomb? Why are you still here at the tomb, the angel says – he's not here – he said he'd meet you in Galilee so...get going!

The whole reading made me think a lot.

What are the ways in which I stand, staring at an empty tomb, when I should be in Galilee? And what are the ways in which I stand staring into the sky, when I should be in Jerusalem?

Do you know what I mean? Yea – you do.

It has to do with loss....and how you handle it. How I handle it. And how we do as a church too.

When you've suffered a loss....you can spend your time fixated on that loss, and how things used to be, and how whatever or whoever is was taken from you, ...

You can spend your time and energy that way

Or

You can open yourself to the gifts that you received from that person or situation, discover how it still is with you in some way

And move on.

Dwelling on the loss – to me is like standing there staring into the sky. After a little while you get a sore neck, and you're liable to bump into things. It's not the posture of someone who wants to get anything done.

Getting on with life – even if you don't feel like it, even if you don't know what's next or how you'll manage from here on – that to me is like going back to Jerusalem. They didn't feel like it, and it was a while before they discovered that the promise was true, but they went anyway.

I'm not saying that's easy

And I'm NOT saying people should not feel the sadness and grieve. NOT AT ALL.

There is a time for staring into the sky – for focusing on what we've lost and feeling sorry for ourselves and telling the story of the loss over and over and over again (my theory is 10,000 times is about right) - that's healthy grief. Staring into the sky.

But sooner or later

2 figures in white (they come in many forms)

come along and say

Why are you standing there staring into the sky? Maybe it's time to go to Jerusalem.

There are so many losses in life, aren't there? Death of course

But others too – painful and grieved in almost the same way.

Loss of employment, health, kids, relationships, loss of a dream, how you thought your life would turn out and did not....

It's hard. And you're tempted to sometimes dwell on the point of departure. The details of how it used to be and what happened that caused the loss. Staring into the sky at the spot where Jesus was taken from them.

If you are suffering such a loss right now, do all the staring you need to do. Cry it out, think it out, scream it out if you need to....write or sing or wallow....you have a perfect right to those feelings – and it's healthy and right to do that.

But know this: there is a promise of life beyond the loss. THERE IS A PROMISE OF LIFE BEYOND THIS LOSS. What it will be, is yours to discover

But the discovery will not come while you are still staring into the sky. The strange thing is that it's only when you've stopped staring, as it were, and returned to Jerusalem, returned to the daily, ordinary routine of life, that you find out how that person or that situation is with you yet – the gifts that you have from them – the ways you've been changed because of it, and then, for better or worse, you move on, taking with you the very thing you thought you'd lost. Taking its gifts and strengths as a blessing and leaving behind what needs to be left.

I urge you in all your losses to look to the promise of God

That there will be empowerment and new life – and that you will discover in new and powerful ways the gifts you receive from what you have lost

And the ways those gifts empower you for faithful and creative and compassionate living

Now and in the future.

You will make this discovery not as you dwell on the past

But as you re-enter living, doing what you need to do every day

Keeping close in prayer and in community with others who also seek and trust

May the God of promise whose word is true and can be trusted

Bless you as you turn your eyes from the sky and begin to go to Jerusalem.

Amen.