

May 24, 2020  
“I’m In Heaven”

Acts 1:6-14  
John 17:1-11

Today is something of a watershed moment for me. It is the first time I have presided at a Sunday morning service since retiring from full time ministry last year. It has been almost a year, and I have just about kept a promise to myself to back away from the work of my vocation while I discerned the “what next?” Watershed is a good term to describe the transition into retirement. Water has been shed as I grieved...and yet...slowly, and I will say with the help of a pandemic, I am surfacing into acceptance, contentment, and an emerging sense of renewed purpose. Which leads me to my hammock. You may be wondering why there is a photo of legs stretched out in a hammock on the front of the bulletin, when a picture of Jesus rising to heaven in a cloud might be more appropriate. And, settled into my hammock, it doesn’t look as if I am emerging from anything.

My first comments to Karen when she asked if I would do pulpit supply today were also appropriately questionable: “Ascension Sunday...up goes Jesus into heaven...and the first thing I want to say is “what is heaven?”” “It’s okay, Sally,” was Karen’s reply. “You can say it, and if you like you don’t have to do Ascension, you can do the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter.” It was a few days after this exchange that I got a couple of hook things to hang up the hammock that I bought at the bric-a-brac table at Christ Church Gabriola’s Christmas Bazaar last December. It had been lurking in wintery storage until a sunny 20 degrees moved me to unearth it and work out how to string it up. The task accomplished, I lay back, and looked up into the trees at the sky. In terms of biblical geography, I was no where near heaven, but I was definitely “in” heaven. I took a selfie of my feet pointed towards the sky and emailed it to Karen (she has the other hammock that was for sale at the bazaar) with a follow-up comment: “I know exactly where heaven is.”

Images of heaven are varied and many. In pastoral ministry with an early start in hospital chaplaincy in the palliative and intensive care units, I would often be called to the bedside of terminally ill or dying patients. Faced with death, the eyes at the bedside often blended the knowledge of impending loss with a search for hope...a look beyond the wrench of now in reach for the next. I have a spiritual sense of next, but no definitive answer to a question of what or where heaven is if the expectation of heaven is a place where God lives in throne-ly splendour. I am more comfortable turning the question around: "What is heaven for you...what is your image of heaven?" With this question, heaven becomes personal, attainable and comforting: a garden, a golf course, a kayak in paddle, a place of community. Even my dad in his last weeks of life...my dad, ever the practical and reasoned engineer, who for years pushed against the faith he had been raised to, is quoted as saying: "we are, then we aren't, there is nothing else..." When his time here was reduced to looking out of the window from his long term care bed at the tops of trees swaying in a blue sky...even he, in something of a whisper, said: "I am wondering what is beyond the sky." He may be gone, but I haven't lost sight of my dad.

It is the spirit of heaven that I don't want to lose sight of as I ponder Jesus' ascension. The first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles recalls the witnesses account of the resurrected Jesus as he is taken up into heaven in a cloud. There is huge down to earth symbolism in this second leave-taking. After the crucifixion, the disciples retreated to the Upper Room and cowered there in fear. Peter had denied and everything they had believed about Jesus was dead and buried with him. The post-Easter stories tell us that Jesus defied all barriers and confronted their fear with a presence that said: "Peace be with you." Jesus had showed up in their lives again and they had something new to discover in him and in themselves. Like seeds lurking in the ground of despair, the disciples receive from Jesus the start they needed to emerge out of hiding with a

fresh perspective. But there were still doubts and they weren't quite ready to fully leave the protection of their closed room just yet.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus follows up "Peace be with you," with "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21) The Gospel of Matthew concludes with the Great Commission and Jesus' invitation to create disciples. (Matthew 28:16-20) Both Luke and Mark's Gospel end with a brief note on Jesus' ascension: "...after he had spoken to [the disciples], [Jesus] was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God." (Mark 16:19). All the Gospels lead into the Book of Acts with statements that bear witness to Jesus present in the disciples' lives despite his physically leaving them, with a call to follow in his footsteps...to love as Jesus loves: "Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17) The first chapter of Acts recalls the witness of Jesus' ascension by way of a cloud into heaven. Those bearing witness are left with their feet on the ground looking up, and the very first thing they do is step out and recruit a new disciple. This begs the question...if Jesus had stayed with them, recognizable in body and form, would they have been moved to "seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with their God..." and, in turn, call others to do the same? (Micah 6:8)

However we envision the concept of heaven today, bringing Jesus and heaven together leads Jesus into communion with God, Creator, Holy of Holies, and creates in us, the followers of Jesus, life-purpose that is "heaven-sent." It is by being in communion with the Holy and the Sacred that we do the work of creating heaven on earth. We, who follow in the way of Jesus, are connected by way of faith to the Source of Life and Love that is radical compassion personified and made accessible to us so that we might be the hands and feet of God where we stand, thus revealing the heart of our humanity...a kind of heaven in itself.

When I laid myself back in my newly-hung hammock, it felt like heaven! I was

suspended between the earth and the sky, and wrapped as if by some unseen force in a cocoon of brightly coloured material that held me as if it were the hand of love. For a time, it felt wonderful...not a care in the world. Caught up as I was in a hammock-y moment, however, I couldn't stay there. The epiphany came as I swung out of the hammock to place my feet back on the ground. In finding heaven within the hammock's suspended safety, I had experienced communion with the Holy. With my feet on the ground again, I regained life-purpose and felt supported in stepping out into the next—called, claimed, and commissioned. It felt like peace.

There is a life-path for us to follow, and I believe it is heaven sent. All the good we are doing, even in the midst of a pandemic—all the loving, the tending, the feeding, the staying at home, the heart signs to show those on the front lines that we are thankful and grateful, the witness to change as we lighten our tread on planet earth and earth's creatures come out to play, the shifting of human values to reveal that we are not prepared to sacrifice the dignity of human life for the sake of wealth creation—all of it reveals that with good purpose the work of transforming earth as we know it into a place we can call heaven is holy and just.

The disciples in the Upper Room thought everything had ended with Jesus' crucifixion. The Holy One refused to leave them be, however. Their response to Jesus in a new way brought them back into communion with God. With Jesus' ascension, they stepped out of their Upper Room cocoon to embrace a new reality, and it called to them to speak in the world with words of peace and to do all they could to overturn injustice and help mend the brokenness around them. Jesus hadn't been syphoned off into a place beyond us. Rather he was found in them...is found in us. We carry the seeds of compassion in our hearts...a holy planting that turns over fresh soil in preparation for new growth. Our faith may reach for the heavens for inspiration, but it is here, on the ground, as you follow in Jesus' footsteps where heaven is made. Amen.