

One bright morning, Thom Boogart, a theological prof., was walking to work moving against the grain of children making their way to a nearby school, when he witnessed a father yelling from inside a house across the street. “Hurry up!”

A boy and a girl, maybe nine and ten banged open the front screen door and ran down the steps toward the car in the driveway. As they got into the car, their father appeared in the doorway of the house. He then turned back toward the inside and yelled. “I said, hurry up. If you’re not ready, we’re leaving you behind.”

As the father made his way to the car, a third child, a boy about five-years-old, tumbled down the front steps holding his back pack while trying to put on his coat. “Hurry up! Hurry up!” the Dad kept yelling. The more he yelled, the more the boy struggled, falling to the ground. “Dad, wait,” the boy pleaded.

“No, that’s it,” the father said getting into the car, “We’re leaving.” Revving the car engine he abruptly backed onto the street and drove away. The boy sat up bewildered—then started running after them crying, “Dad, Dad, come back.” Abandonment is one of the deepest fears known to human beings.

On this last Sunday in the Great 50 Days of Easter we remember the Ascension, celebrated last Thursday on the 40th day of Easter. As the Apostle’s Creed proclaims, “On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father.” According to Luke, Jesus leads his disciples to a hill just outside Jerusalem and lifting up his hands he blesses them. As he is blessing them they witness as he withdraws and is carried up into heaven. And before their eyes Jesus disappears from their sight. Is this a story of abandonment?—or of Jesus abandoning our human world?

The gospels make it clear that Jesus’ departure was part of the plan from the beginning. Jesus told his disciples that as he had come from the Father, and to the Father he would return. According to Acts, 40 days following the resurrection, Jesus ascends into heaven. Every time we hear 40 in the Bible our ears perk up. It means: *something new is being birthed*. 40 weeks is the gestation period for a new human life. Remember Noah and the flood that lasted 40 days/nights birthing a new washed clean world. The Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness and were formed as the people of God. And after 40 days the resurrected Christ ascends to heaven. So what new thing is being birthed here?)

Did you ever notice that there’s not much detail about what Jesus actually did during this 40 days after his resurrection? In Luke’s Gospel the whole 40-days are covered in one single chapter where there’s nothing strikingly new; Jesus continues walking, talking, asking questions, teaching. In John’s Gospel Jesus is cooking and offering fishing tips. African American preacher, Lisa Weaver says, these post-resurrection appearances and actions of Jesus are kind of like a movie entitled: Jesus: THE SEQUEL—same actions, different plot. So how does the plot differ?

The disciples are going to need a different dimension of faith for what lies ahead of them after Jesus ascends. So during this 40 days a change is happening in them—from students/disciples, to becoming apostles/witnesses who are sent out to do the work of Jesus themselves. As Jesus says in John 14:12, “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

The actions of the disciples in this post-resurrection period are not much different, but their encounters with the resurrected Jesus actually help to move the *faith needle* in each of them—from doubt to faith, from fear to confident courage, from disciple to apostle and witness—because there is a greater work to do. So in this 40-days the spotlight is shifting from what the bodily Jesus does—to what he will do through his disciples-turned-witnesses. In this 40-day period the spotlight is shifting. And it shifts from Jesus’ work to **our work**. The pre-resurrection focus is on what Jesus does, because he had to show us what to do. But the post-resurrection

focus is on Jesus' shifting responsibility, because he has modeled for us and now dispatched us to do the work; so the disciples pick up where Jesus leaves off. Jesus steps back so that disciples can lean in and take up the ministry. As Jesus said, you will do "greater works than these."

Yet Jesus does not abandon his disciples. St. Augustine wrote: "You ascended from before our eyes, and we turned back grieving, only to find you in our hearts." Something amazingly new was being birthed here at Ascension. Jesus left few traces of himself on earth. He wrote no books or papers, had no home to turn into a museum, no possessions. We would know nothing about him, except for the traces he left in human beings. Ascension is not about the power of Jesus vanishing into heaven. It is about having that power unleashed into all the earth in an even more powerful way. While on earth Jesus affected only those immediately around him. After he ascends, he unleashes his powerful presence on this entire globe. It's like perfume, that can only be fully present when it's fragrance is released from the bottle and it is allowed to fill a whole room. By his ascension, Christ is now accessible to all of us. And it's on Pentecost that we see the faith needle move most dramatically from doubt to faith, from fear to confident courage, from disciple to apostle and witness. Those who had previously nothing to say are given something to speak to the world about—That because of Jesus Christ there is no life and situation that is so hopeless that his forgiving love can't transform it and bring hope; that in this world of division and hunger there is a power at work to foster healing wholeness and peace—one soul at a time. We are witnesses who testify to such hope—and NOW is the time when such hope is needed.

And one from our midst who has become such a witness to Christ's healing hope and power is Andrea McMillin (Lorne Kelly's daughter, a daughter of St. Andrew's). Recently Andrea shared witness through her own story. As a child, Andrea remembers sitting in her grade one classroom—staring at those lines and circles that others called letters, and trying to make sense of them. She writes: "The children around me could use them to form sounds that then made words and sentences. So full of anxiety and embarrassment, I would run to the coat room, hide and sob. (Yet) in the coat room I would (also) hear God whisper, 'Everything will be alright.' God had a way of calming my fears like no human could—and I would remember the song from Sunday school. "God is so good, God is so good, God is so good, He's so good to me...He loves me so, he loves me so, he loves me so, He's so good to me."

Andrea continues, "My learning disability meant that my battle with reading and learning would be lifelong, but I knew that I was precious to God and that through God's guidance, grace and Spirit, I could face whatever challenge was put in front of me. To help navigate all the victories and trials, God gave me amazing parents. My mother (even) went before the court to bear witness that my designated school was not fit for me." (In grade three it was suggested that Andrea would probably not make it past grade nine.) She continues, "My mother's courage allowed me to find a wonderful school that chose to see my capabilities. They took the embarrassment and anxiety about learning disabilities away and helped me build the skills and confidence needed to equip me for the "real world."

Andrea not only finished high school, but also completed two university degrees and now works in a job where she advocates for young adults with disabilities. Andrea concludes: "My parent's encouragement, in particular, played a key role in finding courage in the Bible, through prayer and perseverance, and to take the risk to just try something new.... They helped me learn **that positive things can come out of a failed experience.**"

And right there is the Good News that we witnesses to—especially in a pandemic: There is no life and situation that is so hopeless that the forgiving love of Jesus can't transform it and bring hope; that in this world of division and hunger there is a power at work to bring healing wholeness and peace. To this good news you and I are witnesses with testimony to share.