



Easter 7: June 1, 2014

Bishop's Visitation to St. John the Divine, Maple Ridge, BC

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Acts 1:6-14

When the apostles had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he 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 men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

The first significant person in my life that I ever had to say goodbye to was an Austrian-born young boy who was my very best childhood friend. Walter, as his parents had named him, was the son of an Army physician who, like my own father, was stationed in Munich in the mid to late 1950's. Walter had dark hair, intense blue eyes, and a kind of pirate smile at odds with his formal sounding name. To be with him (and we were inseparable) was to be in the company of my other half.

I can't say that I remember the day we moved back to the States from Germany. I can't say that I remember whatever sadness I must've felt as I said goodbye to someone who had been such a part of my everyday life as a child. But what I do remember was the strange way it felt to be back in the US without my closest compatriot and confidant. I felt disoriented, alone, at loose ends, not quite myself.

I tell this story to evoke in myself and to invite you to remember what it's like to tell someone or something important goodbye. I'm asking all of us to do this because saying goodbye to someone or something important is at the core of the story of the Ascension, the story we hear in our reading from the Book of Acts today. In that story, the disciples who have been close to Jesus during the forty days after Jesus' resurrection are now telling him goodbye or rather are having to tell him goodbye in that he is leaving them, or, as Luke says, he "was lifted up and a cloud took him out of sight."

And with the question the two men in white robes are asking the disciples ("Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?") we get a little hint about how the disciples are feeling. They are perhaps feeling a little stunned, a little disoriented and alone, at loose ends, not quite like themselves.

But as we might expect, Luke's perspective on the separation of Jesus from his followers (and, I might add, the perspective of the writer of John's Gospel) gives us a different way to look at the disciples' loss and some of our own losses as well.

Yes, the Biblical writers we hear today give us a different perspective on loss. And that perspective is something like this: "When you lose something or someone important, something or someone vital to you, come back to yourself and wait, wait where you are, for the loss that you think that has disoriented you, the loss that has left you alone, at loose ends and not quite like yourself, will be the place where you will receive a spirit of renewal and empowerment. And, furthermore, what you can do in the meantime, between your loss and your new life is to stick together, to stay in community and to pray.

As I look at it, in saying these positive things to us about what to do in the face of loss, our reading identifies three different impulses that are our temptations when we lose something or someone important to us.

Let me say a little about each.

First, the temptation for our attention to get fixed on what was or what might be instead of what is. When we lose something or someone, our impulse is to want to either hold onto what we've lost or jump too quickly to the new thing. Whether this is personal or as a community of faith, it can be hard to stay where we're planted when loss overtakes us. Knowing this, Luke's account includes two men in white robes that direct the disciples' attention away from the clouds and back down to earth. In addition, Jesus himself tells the disciples to go right back to where they have been living, to where the crucifixion in fact happened. He tells them to return to Jerusalem. It will be there that a spirit of renewal and empowerment for the future will come to them.

Second, in the face of loss, the temptation is to pull away from each other. Loss isolates. It sends us within ourselves or splits communities into small groups of mourners for the past. This is insidious in that loss, whether personal or communal, can only be navigated, our faith would say, in community, with others around us. And so Luke's account goes to some trouble to name those who gathered in the upper room together after Jesus' ascension: "Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James...together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as (Jesus') brothers." The spirit of renewal and empowerment comes to a community gathered, to individuals who are in the company of others.

And, finally, the temptation to abandon prayer: It is so easy to see loss, to see change, as a time that God has abandoned us, and to walk away from doing our part to keep the two-way channel between ourselves and God, that is, prayer, open. But prayer is the way of discernment through loss and change: prayer that say what is on our mind, that offers our questions, that voices our lament, that expresses both our perplexities and our delights and then that listens, listens, listens. And so in our story from the book of Acts, Luke is careful to tell us that those gathered "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer."

Where are you in the in-between place of loss without as yet being given a new life? Where are you as you attempt to stay in the present moment, to stay connected to others, to stay with prayer?

And here in the community of St. John the Divine, where do you as a community find yourselves in the in-between place between the loss of something cherished and familiar and the arrival of something new through God's own empowering Spirit? Where are you experiencing the tug toward and away from community and prayer in the middle of trying to live faithfully in the in-between place that the story of the Ascension is all about?

You probably know this but it bears repeating. Our lesson from Acts for this morning, the first story of the book of Acts, is the very same story told at the end of Gospel of Luke. What this interesting repetition tells us is that the loss of Jesus into the heavens is both an ending and a beginning, the same way that it is in our own lives. About the nature of that loss for the disciples, Barbara Brown Taylor says these words, words that leave us with yet one more perspective on where our own focus needs to be:

" "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" That is what the two men in white robes said to the disciples on the mount called Olivet just outside of Jerusalem. Luke calls them men in white robes, anyway, so as not to scare anyone, but you can bet...that they were angels—angels sent to remind God's friends that if they wanted to see him again, it was no use looking up. Better they should look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their ordinary lives, because that was where they were most likely to find him—not the way they used to know him, but the new way, not in his own body but in their bodies, the risen, the ascended Lord who was no longer anywhere on earth so that he could be everywhere instead."

Barbara Brown Taylor in *Christianity Today*: May 18, 1998 Vol. 42, No. 6, Page 46