

Eyes Heavenward

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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John 17:20-26

²⁰"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Acts 1:1-11

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They 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.”

O Living Word abide within us. O Living Word grow within in us and take root so that we, your church, may grow with you and bear good fruit. May your word increase as mine decreases. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It is a funny thing we *humans* do whenever we say good bye. We all do it! Just go to an airport and you can see it in action. We humans love to wave our goodbyes. It is a bold statement fighting against the realities of ever growing time and space growing between two people. Even when we know that it is impossible for someone to see our hands or our faces, we still wave. We watch and wave as cars pull away from driveways, as travelers pass through security, as floats make their way in a parade. I've watched as people waved at hot air balloons floating overhead. I saw a child at the top of the Empire State Building waving

enthusiastically asking “Do you think dad can see me?” We watch, we wave, and we hold on as something moves further and further from our sight, further from our touch. *It’s a very human thing to do.* In fact, I can imagine that if I were among the apostles on that first Ascension Day, I would have been the one with a goofy smile, squinting against the sun, waving. After all, Jesus - as the eternal son of God - must have pretty good eyesight. Probably, a bit better than 20/20.

Despite the angel’s admonition at the end, the apostles are in pretty good company on that first Ascension Day. They are not the only ones who would have stopped on the side of the road, waiting awkwardly, unsure of when it was okay to move on. There are so many moments in our lives when we see something, experience something, are part of something so very profound, that we pause, waiting and wondering unsure of the moment when it is over.

We’re not sure when the next thing begins.

It’s the crowd in the theater waiting through the credits for one more scene. The audience watching the wings as the applause continues wondering if an encore is inevitable. Are there more fireworks to explode, more words to be said, one more chapter waiting? As much as we wave our goodbyes, we also pause, frozen in the waiting, wanting to know if it’s really over. It is a few more seconds of holding on to something that feels so very important and so very fleeting that we’re waiting for some kind of cue to know that it’s okay to move on.

A couple from my first congregation were leaving the hospital with their firstborn child. Bearing bags, gifts, and a complicated car seat with newborn baby, they came to the large atrium by the main doorway of the hospital and stopped. Waiting, they watched people move past them, for more than a half an hour. They stopped, because they were sure that under no circumstances, after all after all the hoopla, the baby security systems, the constant monitoring, that suddenly they could just walk through those large rotating doors and be out in the world with this helpless child. Surely there was something else they needed to do. So they waited, and waited, and watched as people rushed around them.

As they were waiting, they began to feel like something wasn’t quite right. It had been almost an hour. That was the moment when a very kind security officer found them. “Are you okay?” He asked. “Thank goodness, they responded!” Maybe he was their salvation! With all the earnest enthusiasm of

new parents, they asked, “Do you know what happens next?” The look on the man’s face told them that wasn’t the right question to ask. So they added a few more: “Do we need to sign something? Do you need to check the car seat?” The man just shook his head, and pointed to the door. “It’s all up to you now. Congratulations. You’ll be just fine.” They left the hospital with their complicated car seat and an even more complicated baby to begin a new life together. Now heading towards six years, Nate is doing just fine, as are his parents.

But you understand that moment when you’re waiting and wondering, unsure of what happens next.

The Resurrected Christ triumphed over death, sin and the very gates of Hell and then spent forty days with his Apostles. Here at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, they are wondering what those *ACTS* are going to be. They are waiting to see what’s going to happen next, what’s the next big finish in Jesus ministry? Jesus promises them something good is coming, something great is on its way. They know that they’re supposed to stay in Jerusalem for this “great thing,” but what is it? What happens next?

They want to know. You can hear the anticipation in their voices when they ask, “Is this the time you will restore the kingdom of Israel?” Is that the big finish? Armies of angels marching through the streets of Jerusalem? Jesus tells them that they’ll have to wait.

Instead of answering their question, Jesus tells them what is going to come: the arrival and the power of the Holy Spirit. He tells them the path that they and the Good News will take from an upper room in Jerusalem to the very ends of the Earth. Jesus adds a cautionary: *But not yet. They have to wait. Wait for the power of God to descend? Wait for the power of God when the resurrected Jesus is right there, staring back at you?*

To be honest, Ascension Day is a strange moment both mathematical and theological for the faithful. *I know we don’t typically throw you a math problem before noon on a Sunday, but bear with me:* there are 40 days from the day of Jesus’ Resurrection until his ascension. Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit, takes place on the 50th day after Easter. That means, yes, there are 10 days- a Thursday through a Sunday when the apostles are on their own: after Jesus has ascended, but before the Spirit has descended. It’s longer than they waited for

Jesus' resurrection. It means that this last Sunday in Eastertide ALWAYS falls between Jesus' ascension and the Holy Spirit's arrival. There's ALWAYS a ten day stretch of waiting. But when does the waiting begin? Where is the sign that Jesus' big exit is really over? *Where should we be looking if not to the heavens? Straining our eyes for a glimpse of a foot, or the hem of a robe, or one last wave from a friend. Straining our ears for one last word, instruction, a good bye from our friend.*

As we enter into these 10 days how do we know it's okay to move on?

I think there might be some purpose in these 10 strange days between the Ascension and Pentecost—*that's not just because I'm the pastor assigned to preach on this Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost*—I think there's something very human in this need to wait, to grapple and come to terms with, to sit with a new reality. Before the Apostles can live into their new role as witnesses and church builders, miracle workers and preachers, they have to come to terms with the fact that their world has fundamentally changed. Even with the Holy Spirit, they are the ones who will be speaking the words, they will be the ones healing the sick. They will be the workers and the witnesses and the walkers of long roads. I think there is holy purpose in the math that separates Ascension from Pentecost. I think there is holy purpose in the waiting.

The Book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. Just like the Gospel, the Book of Acts is designed to be an orderly account of the early church. A thoughtful, well presented, well researched account. It is meant to tell the story faithfully. It begins here with the apostles watching Jesus leave for the heavens and waiting for what happens next. Luke sums up all the amazing things Jesus did and then less than 10 verses later Jesus is GONE. The Apostles, they are left, seemingly alone, trying to figure out what to do next.

I'd be looking heavenward too, because otherwise, I'd have to look at James or John or Peter and trust them to have an idea of what we're supposed to do. Worse yet, what if I look and see them looking at me wondering if I know what's the next step, because I certainly don't know the way to the ends of the earth. The heavens are a much better view.

We're standing there next to the door, certain that we're not ready yet. Waiting for a sign.

Sometimes we forget what grace looks like. For me, on this last Sunday of Eastertide, grace looks like a group of Apostles staring heavenward and the arrival of white robed guests. Instead of a God who shouted down and said “Figure it out!” Instead of a God who left them there hanging and wondering. Instead of a God who expected those 11 to hop to it and get started. *I see grace in the 10 days of waiting. Grace in the angels, who stand beside them and call their attention back.*

The Acts of the Apostles begins not with a perfect plan outlined by Peter, it begins here with the Angels decked in white making a repeat performance. Just like Easter morning, they are there reminding Jesus’ friends where they should be going. The same angels who should have been with the heavenly host welcoming Jesus back; rejoicing as the Son returns triumphant, they have been sent to meet the apostles on the side of a dusty road reminding them they need to get back to Jerusalem.

Friends, we all find ourselves in waiting moments: sometimes a second, an hour, sometimes days and sometimes decades stretch between moments that are profound and important, moments when we’re not sure how to let go and start something new.

It is when new graduates are holding on to a diploma or a title, but not sure what that means yet.

It’s after the tests that are taken, but before the results arrive.

It’s a job ending and a new one not quite finalized.

It’s putting away a wedding dress and hanging a picture, but still trying to understand “married”.

It’s standing next to a grave, wondering how long until the hurt stops.

It’s checking our phones and reading a news feed, afraid and mourning for those who were killed and those who are injured in Virginia Beach, not knowing how long to watch and wait. Wondering when the news is over, when the next story begins.

We wait with our eyes heavenward uncertain of the right moment to move on. But friends, on this Ascension Sunday, as we look heavenward, we need to remember that the risen reigning Christ, was also, and is also, Jesus of Nazareth.

He knows what it is to be all too human. He knew what it was to walk away from Nazareth watching and waving to Mary and Joseph. The one who sent his disciples out and watching until they were just dots on the horizon. The one who knelt praying in the garden his eyes heavenward asking, “God what comes next?”

That Jesus understands what it is to be human; that we humans need a little time, a little waiting. We need a little time to wait to breathe and live into this new thing. Jesus understands that is holy work.

Jesus understands the holy work of waiting and our tendency to look away. So when you're ready to look down again, remember that there are indeed angels beside us in the dirt ready to point us back to Jerusalem and all the comes next.