

Ascension Day 2017

St. Anne's Episcopal Church

A Holy Leave-taking

The Feast of the Ascension of Jesus, which we commemorate tonight, marks an important milestone between Easter and Pentecost, yet I find myself wondering if the disciples would consider the Ascension a feast day to celebrate. According to Luke, it must have been a miraculous, stupefying sight for the disciples who reported witnessing Jesus leaving them for the heavens; but, I can't imagine them really celebrating his leave-taking, not when they had just gotten Jesus back from the dead, not when they needed him so much—needed him to be *with them*. Surely this parting brought them a sorrow that was not too sweet; and surely it left them bereft and lost when the last bit of Jesus disappeared into the clouds. Artists for centuries have painted the Ascension showing the feet of Jesus—identified by the marks of the nails from his crucifixion—sticking out below the clouds like some last goodbye—representing the departure of that last bit of his humanity from the world.

Leave-takings are usually not easy for anyone. Sure, sometimes they are exciting, like when leaving for good long vacation, or leaving one's childhood home for college or to cross the threshold of a new marriage, or moving to the big city for a new dream job—at least they are exciting when you are *young*. Yet leave-takings—even when timely and necessary—can be difficult. Moving from a place of relative stability—where everybody knows your name—to a place of becoming the outsider, the stranger, can bring on anxiety and grief, even when the hand of God is leading the whole way. Leaving—or having one we love and need leave *us*—is layered with loss, even when we know in our heart of hearts it is the right thing to be happening.

Our scripture is full of leave-takings: Adam and Eve out of the garden; Abraham and Sarah leaving from Ur—without a clear destination; Jacob leaving the wrath of his betrayed brother Esau to travel from Beersheba to Haran, the home of his Uncle Laban and his future wives, and years later leaving with his sons for Egypt to escape famine;

Moses leaving from Egypt to Midian to escape punishment for killing Pharaoh's guard, and then leaving his new Midianite family to go back again—to lead the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan. The whole story of God's people is framed in movement from one place to another—even as they moved towards and away and towards God—again and again. In and out of exile, away from danger and into lands of promise, from complacency to alienation to deliverance, over and over. Even as humanity longs to be settled and stable, we are ever challenged by the shifting, disrupting, constantly moving thing that is life as we know it.

That Jesus had been telling the disciples that he would soon be leaving them to go to the Father did not seem to change their usual inability to comprehend what was about to happen. “*Lord, is **this** the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*” We have to try a little tenderness towards the disciples when we hear this question asked in the story from the Book of Acts. Life with Jesus had been full of confusion and loss and surprise, and yet even after their first-hand witness to the Crucifixion and the Resurrection they were still waiting for Jesus to act in the familiar ways of their world—to use his power to destroy their political and religious oppressors, and to bring about the restoration of Israel in their lifetimes. Those “many convincing proofs” that Jesus was alive again surely would have led them to think Jesus was up to the task; it is doubtful that they understood until it happened that he was going away for good, and leaving the job to them.

Luke tells us that Jesus chose Bethany as the place of his leaving-taking—it was the place where Lazarus had been raised, where Martha had fed him and his friends, and where Mary took “the better part” of hanging on his every word. Bethany was a place where Jesus knew both power and solace, challenge and devotion—a full range of possible human emotions and experience. It was here that Jesus promised that the Advocate—the ultimate experience of both power and solace—would be coming to those he loved from the Father. Perhaps it was being in the familiar place of Bethany that allowed the disciples to have their minds *opened* to understand the scriptures, so that somehow—when Jesus lifted up his hands to bless them—they were able to watch him ascend to the heavens without completely melting down in the moment.

Luke tells us the disciples went away from the Ascension scene with joy, yet we know from the rest of the story that not long after, their fear of the authorities led them to the locked upper room only to be chased later by the Holy Spirit on the day we celebrate as Pentecost. The kingdom they sought was not to come with the familiar shifting power of humans defeating each other in endless cycles of drama and violence, but was to come with the power of faith and love and sacrifice and hope in the name that *was and is* above every other name in their age, in our age, and in the ages to come. Jesus did *leave* them at the Ascension, but through his teachings and his love God stayed with them—through the Holy Spirit God empowered them to carry on the work of the kingdom, coming and going throughout the world to spread the Good News of forgiveness and grace offered through Jesus Christ.

So as we praise and worship the Christ, whose homecoming we celebrate this night, may God our Father bless us in all our leave-takings and “clothe us with power from on high” for all the journeys ahead that will bring us ever closer to the kingdom.
AMEN