

Blessing in Letting Go
Rev. Cindy Maddox
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Luke 24:44-53

Barbara Brown Taylor, a famous preacher, teacher, and writer,
says that going to church

“is one of the most peculiar things [contemporary] human beings can do—
to come together week after week
with no intention of being useful or productive,
but only ... to declare things they cannot prove
about a God they cannot see.”¹

When you put it that way, it’s a wonder any of us are here!
Why would we want to do something so peculiar?

She goes on to say,

“Our word for it is *worship*, and it is hard to justify in this day and age;
but those of us who do it over and over again begin to count on it.
This is how we learn where we fit.
This is how we locate ourselves between the past and the future,
between our hopes and our fears, between the earth and the stars.
This is how we learn who we are and what we are supposed to be doing:
by coming together to sing and to pray, to be silent and to be still,
by peering into the darkness together
and telling each other what we see when we do.

We may baffle our unbelieving friends and neighbors, but it cannot be helped.

Half the time we baffle ourselves,
proclaiming good news when the news is so bad,
trusting the light when the sky is so dark,
continuing to wait on the Savior in our midst
when all the evidence suggests that
he packed up and left a long, long time ago.

To be theologically correct, we have been waiting on the Savior
ever since the first Ascension Day,

when Jesus led his disciples . . . outside of Jerusalem,
spoke to them for the last time, and disappeared inside a cloud.”²

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. “The Day We Were Left Behind.” *Christianity Today*.

² Ibid.

The story of Christ's ascension into heaven is told twice in our scriptures:
here at the end of the Gospel According to Luke,
and also in the first chapter of the book of Acts.

The two stories are very different.

In Acts, Christ's leave-taking occurs forty days after the resurrection.

After rising from the dead, apparently Christ stuck around for a while,
appearing to the disciples and teaching them,
before rising up to heaven and sending angels
to tell the people to get to work.

But here in Luke, the day of ascension is the day of resurrection.

There is no forty-day waiting period,
no extended visit by the risen Savior.

Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus,
and apparently to Simon Peter, although we don't get that scene;
appeared to the disciples and ate with them;
then led them out of town, blessed them, and was carried up into heaven.

That is one really full day!

I'm not sure which story I prefer.

Since most scholars agree the same person wrote both Luke and Acts,
apparently the author couldn't decide which he preferred either,
and just used both!

And celebrating it once is strange enough.

After all, who wants to celebrate Christ leaving us?

Who wants to celebrate being left alone?

Don't we have enough experience with being left to our own devices?

Don't we already know the pain of loneliness and emptiness
when a loved one has left the earth—and us?

Why would we want to celebrate Christ leaving us, too?

Next week, on Pentecost, we will celebrate the coming of the Spirit in a new way,
God's presence with us, filling and empowering us.

But first, today, we acknowledge that sometimes it feels like we are left alone.
Sometimes it feels like God is far removed.

We know this feeling especially in weeks like this one,
when a horrific tragedy strikes, and we grieve the loss of innocent lives;

and weeks like last week,
when another act of senseless violence took innocent lives,
and the week before that and the week before that.
Sometimes it feels like God is far removed,
for how could God let such things continue to happen?
And then we remind ourselves
that God could be asking us the same question.

But that really isn't what this passage is about.
In neither telling (in Luke or Acts) is it about God leaving us or abandoning us.
Instead it is about Jesus leaving earth in order to return to heaven
so that we might carry on Christ's work.

So let's look again at the Luke passage.

Luke tells us, "Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany..."

Do you remember Bethany?

Bethany is where Jesus often went when he needed some time alone.
Bethany is where Jesus' friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived,
and where Jesus brought Lazarus back to life.

Bethany is where the woman with the alabaster jar broke it
and poured out a valuable oil on his head, anointing and blessing him.

"Bethany stands as a place of healing, restoration of life,
hospitality, and friendship. . . .

For Jesus' companions who witness his ascension,

Bethany conjures memories that Jesus means for them to draw upon
as they begin to live without him.

Bethany was a place where hospitality, friendship, and the miraculous intertwined
in the community around Jesus.

The fact that he chooses it as his place of departure
suggests that he intends for them to remember
that these gifts will remain with them."

Of course it would happen in Bethany, a place of healing, restoration of life,
hospitality, and friendship.

But there's another possible consideration about Bethany.

Many scholars believe that the name "Bethany"
meant "house of affliction" or "poor house."

This suggests that the village "may have been used as a center

for caring for the sick and aiding the destitute and pilgrims to Jerusalem.”

And there are several biblical references that support this claim.

So this is where Jesus takes leave of his followers:

in one of the places they will be needed the most.

The place they have found community, yes;

but also the place they will be community as well.

Writer and minister Steven Garnaas-Holmes has this to say about the ascension:

*It's all one thing, this loop,
in which the Beloved ascends
not into distant heavens
but into the suffering of the world,
and radiates forgiveness
that changes people,
who rise into a wounded world
to proclaim altered lives
and the miracle of ascending
from suffering to forgiveness,
of which we are witnesses,
even this very day,
rising
to begin again.*

We rise every day to begin again,
to find community and be community,
to find a blessing and to be one.

The story tells us that Jesus took his disciples as far out as Bethany,
knowing that they needed this reminder.

Apparently Jesus also knew that they needed a blessing,
something to remember and hold on to in the days to come.

But notice that he didn't bless them and then leave.

“Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany,
and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

*While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them
and was carried up into heaven.”*

He blessed them as he withdrew.

He withdrew as he blessed them.

Many years ago our family spent a couple days at Disney World.
I was taking a break at the China exhibit in Epcot
when I saw them—a large group of people wearing light blue t-shirts
with the same words on the back.

Prayer Warriors for Nicole.

They had stopped for a photo, all gathered around a girl
also wearing a light blue shirt, but hers just said Nicole.

It was hard to guess her age—she might have been 12 or 17.

It was hard to tell.

She was small and thin and bald,
sitting in her wheelchair, looking exhausted,
and grinning from ear to ear.

I had no way of knowing if she would beat the cancer
or whatever illness she was fighting;
but her frailty and pallor suggested to me
that the Prayer Warriors for Nicole were giving her one last big trip.

One last memory to make.

One last big happy day.

It was their blessing on her before they let her go.

Or maybe it was her blessing for them.

Maybe allowing them to treat her to this special exhausting day
was her gift to them, so they would have good memories,
so they would know they had done this special thing for her.

They might never realize that she had blessed them as she went.

Her shirt said Nicole, but it could have said Jesus.

And it was the China exhibit at Epcot, but it could have been Bethany.

It was a house of affliction, but so much more.

It was a place of belonging and restoration, hospitality and friendship.

It was an ascension.

The gift was in the blessing.

Sometimes the gift is in the letting go.

Sometimes the gift is in the holding on.

Sometimes the gift is in the blessing we had to fight for.

Sometimes the gift is in the blessing we never knew to want.
Sometimes the gift is in coming to Bethany,
this place of belonging and healing and grace,
not knowing if it will help
but not knowing what else to do when we hurt.

Barbara Brown Taylor said that going to church was a peculiar act
because evidence suggests that Jesus packed up and left
a long time ago.

But remember that she also stated so beautifully why we go:

“Those of us who [go to church] over and over again begin to count on it.

This is how we learn where we fit.

This is how we locate ourselves between the past and the future,
between our hopes and our fears, between the earth and the stars.

This is how we learn who we are and what we are supposed to be doing:
by coming together to sing and to pray, to be silent and to be still,
by peering into the darkness together
and telling each other what we see when we do.

We may baffle our unbelieving friends and neighbors, but it cannot be helped.

Half the time we baffle ourselves,
proclaiming good news when the news is so bad,
trusting the light when the sky is so dark,
continuing to wait on the Savior in our midst.”

Today we came to worship, to Bethany, to locate ourselves
between our hopes and our fears,
to learn what we are supposed to be doing,
to peer into the darkness together
and tell each other what we see when we do.

May we see hope.

May we be hope.

For one another.

And for the world.