



Time to Let Go

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
Ascension Sunday, May 24, 2020: Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each one of us Beloved. **Amen.**

Today we are honoring one of the seven great feasts of the Christian liturgical year, and it's the Ascension of Jesus into heaven 40 days after his resurrection. This one can be a real challenge on so many levels regardless of where you are in your own spiritual journey. Christmas and Easter and Pentecost are easier to understand, but this feast can be confusing at best. The resurrected Jesus just ascends into heaven. It's like a scene from Harry Potter or the Lord of the Rings.

But this year, I've been finding this story oddly perfect. Life during this pandemic feels more like a chapter from a dystopian novel than normal life. And in the midst of this craziness, this week I did what I always do when I am preparing a homily, which is to zoom way into the story and imagine myself part of it. What came to me as I was imagining myself as one of the disciples watching Jesus ascend into heaven, is this. It's time to let go.

Jesus died. The world ended. But then he came back in his resurrected form. The disciples experienced the anguish of hope. Maybe things *could* go back to the way things had been. Maybe after all Jesus could do the thing they had hoped he would do which was to restore the kingdom to Israel. To put an end to Roman oppression. But even though they had great hope and great comfort in Jesus' resurrection, those things didn't seem to be happening. And when they saw Jesus ascending into heaven, they finally

knew he was not ever going to be with them again in the same way that he had been. He had promised to be with them, to the end of the world. But things were never going to go back to the way they had been, and when they saw him go up into heaven they realized this. It was time to let go.

It was time to let go of the reason they thought he was there. It was time to let go and to grieve the loss of walking around Palestine with him, watching him heal the sick and multiply loaves and fishes for hungry people and walk on water. It was time to let go of the hope that they could listen to him teach the crowds and totally outrage the powers that be. It was time to let go of the hope that things could go back to the way they had been.

It was also time to wait. Their lives as followers of Jesus were only really just beginning. But what that looked like was finally, radically and permanently changed. They were to wait for the Holy Spirit because only then would they begin to glimpse what the road forward would look like. It was beyond their imagination.

And I think this is exactly where we are. I sincerely believe that our lives as we knew them have finally, radically and permanently changed.

It's not that there is nothing about our old lives that will not continue into the new. Our Parish Administrator Rachel Svihel said in a staff meeting this week, reflecting on this story, that we are called to recognize we are taking seedlings from our old ways and planting them in our new soil. In Jesus' resurrected form, the disciples didn't recognize him at first even though he was the same person. The seedling from the old to the new is the love of God in Christ—the radical, generous, sacrificial love that is embodied in the person of Jesus and revealed to us through the Holy Spirit. But that love is not going to lead us back to the way things were.

We are at a crossroads. The only thing certain is that we aren't going to turn around and walk back to where we were before. We are going to walk forward. But how we do so, and what direction we choose, is unclear and of critical importance. We don't know yet. This is like a blizzard, which is going to be followed by a long winter, and then a mini ice age. When the blizzard stops we're going to dig ourselves out of the snow and try to recognize the landscape around us. What is ours to do, right now, as we watch the resurrected Jesus ascend into heaven, is to let go.

Let us let go of the assumption that what we will have going forward will be just like what we had before at St. John's or elsewhere. Let us let go of the temptation to hoard and cling to that which we have loved so very much, whether that's the pews facing the altar or singing in a huge group or touching the bread and wine together as we celebrate Holy Communion. Let us grieve the loss of those things which will not happen in the same way for a long time. Let us let go of the need to have the same income level to maintain the same house with the same number of cars and visits to the restaurant and monthly credit card balance. Let us let go of our geographic and systemic isolation from those at the margins and find ways to embrace and befriend and come alongside those who are suffering the full fury of this pandemic storm without shelter or help. Let us open our hearts and minds and lives to those who see things differently than we do, within St. John's and within our extended families and in our civic life, because we no longer have the illusion of control, and we are still called to seek and serve Christ in all persons, every person.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, life as the disciples had known it was permanently changed. Ours has too. There is loss in this, and I really think we need to acknowledge that loss and grieve. I invite us all to make some time for that this week. To be mad, or frustrated, or even judgmental about all the choices people are making that maybe don't seem necessary to you or right. Make time to not be productive, to not accomplish tasks, to not

numb yourself with Netflix or wine or games, but just face honestly what is hardest about this whole thing for you.

But grieving won't be the end. The Spirit is coming. Joy and power and change are coming. Goodness and life are coming. This isn't just the bunnies and flowers of spring. We are part of an ancient story that has included loss and tragedy worse than this, and the story is not over. We are living it. We can take seedlings from the old and plant them in the new soil and see what marvelous new life grows out of it. We get to choose how to live through this change, when our grieving is spent. But with the disciples, we aren't there yet. For now, we are just watching the old pass away, and our work for now is both simple and profoundly difficult. It is time to let go.

Let's join our virtual hands, facing our losses, and have compassion for that which feels hardest for ourselves and others even if it's different from what you think is important. Let's take breaks to laugh at ourselves when we can and be gentle when we can't. Let's be cranky or sad or even rant if we need to. Whatever we do, let's do it together. And then let the silence and calm of acceptance come.

This coming week, we'll gather in our virtual upper room, as we actually are, and wait. There is a through line. It's the love of God in Christ which calls us to face outward, and walk into this diaspora when we have received the power of the Spirit. She is coming. Let's be still, and let go, and wait for her. Amen.