

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Luke 24: 36-53 and Ephesians 1:15-23

We remember and celebrate Christ's ascension today. Jesus leaves his disciples again. Jesus sends his disciples to do his work. In my little blurb in the Mid-week update, I invited you to think about launchings, about a time of starting out. But this morning, I wonder, more specifically, about a time when you took on a task or responsibility that you didn't feel ready for yet. Does such a time come to mind? Because all of a sudden, the disciples are commissioned to carry on Jesus' work without him. They no longer stand in his shadow as he works, but now they go in his stead.

Thinking about stepping into a responsibility you don't feel quite ready for takes me back to my Clinical Pastoral Education at Vassar Hospital in Poughkeepsie, NY. It was a required part of my ordination process. In a CPE program, one serves as a Chaplain in a hospital while participating in group processing and supervisor conversations. It is designed as an intense training and maturing process. But the thing that shocked me the first week of it is that they unleash you as Chaplain in the hospital right off, with no initial training or shadowing of somebody. You learn on the fly, on your own. I remember thinking, this group has no idea what we are doing. And that guy, you are just gonna send that guy into a patient's room? He's a train wreck! Nobody needs that!

And so, off we went as a bunch of newbies, several of us in the ordination process of our respective denominations. And we would find ourselves in Stressful emergency rooms filled with anxious family members. Angry patients lying rigid in the bed. Family members distraught. Patients that wanted to hold you hostage by talking endlessly so that you would have to be rude or abrupt if you ever wanted to leave.

Trudi, my supervisor, with whom I met every other week, and who led our group meetings, offered advice early on for these situations, a strategy for dealing with circumstances where you have no idea what to do or what to say, which we would face often enough. She said to think of someone you know who would know what to do or what to say. Think of what they would say, and say that. Think of what they would do, and do that. And perhaps in time, by mimicking your mentors, you will eventually find your own voice and find your own rhythms and responses.

For me, that person was usually Thom Fiet. Thom was my pastor in that season of life and my mentor through the ordination process. It was Thom who was our pastor when our first child was stillborn at term. Thom knew how to be in circumstances that were foreign and uncomfortable to me. He could be present and seemingly natural in many a difficult circumstance. In fact, he thrived on such things. So when I entered a hospital room, introduced myself as a chaplain, and quickly tried to read the situation, I would think about what Thom would say. How he would respond. Thom often brought presence and humor into the most anxious circumstances. Imitating Thom served me well for a good while, and like Trudi prophesied, in time, I would find my own way, my own voice, my own presence.

I think of the disciples watching Jesus ascend to heaven. This wasn't perceived as an end, like Jesus' crucifixion was perceived to be. This movement would continue. It was not the end to a phase but a continuation. But, it was a dramatic shift. For rather than shadowing a more experienced person—rather than deferring to the one who knew what to do and what to say, these disciples would find themselves doing it, and saying it.

It seems like a questionable plan if you ask me. It certainly felt that way in the first days of my chaplaincy at Vassar hospitable. You're just gonna unleash these know-nothings on the hospital?! But that seems to be Jesus' plan too. Learning on the fly, remembering and imitating what he taught them.

They still sought that presence, especially at first. They sought to commune where they knew to find God's presence, which was the temple. Luke says they immediately spent their days in the temple worshipping. In time they would follow the Spirit out from that place. They would get their first calls, and they would venture out and find themselves in all kinds of places, talking to all sorts of people, being called on to respond in a great many uncomfortable situations.

This is long before they had to worry about liturgy and by-laws and music styles and the things that tend to cloud our way of being a church in the world. For them, the ministry seemed to be about being present to the pain and possibility that presented itself in the temple courts, or the city square, or in their comings and goings. I think of Acts 3, early on in this post ascension journey, Peter finds himself before a blind beggar. I imagine him standing there trying to recall what Jesus would do and say in that situation. And as I read that story, it does seem to mirror, in many ways, the stories of Jesus encountering such figures, and healing such people. Think of someone who would know what to do or what to say.

And the funny thing is that I doubt they had to go far to find such opportunities. The trick is learning to see what is right in front of you.

In our Ruminations group, one of the lines in the Luke passage that seemed to stand out was where Jesus, post-resurrection, explains to them from the scriptures how all this was working together, and it says, "then he opened their minds to understand." Coming to see or understand differently, anew.

I wonder how the world looked to them as they returned from Bethany and re-entered Jerusalem again. As they walked past the faces and groups, overhearing conversations. To see the people Jesus would have stopped to talk to, the needy he would have responded to. How did the world look to them – dab and drear in the absence of their leader? Or ripe with possibility? I wonder if they too followed Trudi's advice, to mimic the Christ, however awkwardly, until they found their voice and rhythms, channeling Christ more naturally. Think of what Christ would do and do that. Think of what Christ would say and say that.

The ascension of Christ into heaven is that event that apologists point to say that it is all true. For how else would a band of ragtag, doubting, stumbling fisherman and ragamuffins change the world, if not for the Spirit at work in them; if not the conviction that comes from seeing their savior ascend into heaven. The ascension was the move that made the whole thing expand, multiply, find new expressions. Because all these folks who were used to watching Jesus were now out there trying to imitate him.

For the disciples, as they re-entered the mundane world, it seems that the experience they once knew when walking with Christ was not diminished in his absence. For in one sense, he was still with them through the Spirit and through memory, and through imagining and remembering what he would have said and what he would have done. And in another sense, that experience was not diminished because they came to understand it all more intimately, as they were the ones looking face to face with those seeking forgiveness and hope and love. They were the ones going to the neighboring towns. They were the ones seeing what others did not have the eyes to see. And taking that hot seat, they came to know it all more fully.

I think of the language Paul uses, language of one who, through his journeys and his decision to answer the call to go to the gentiles, he speaks as one who has come to see God's possibility in the world – to see with wonder and awe. He uses phrases like having the "eyes of your heart enlightened," about knowing "the hope to which

[Christ] has called you," about "the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints," and "the immeasurable greatness of Christ's power for us who believe."

On this Ascension Day, we are reminded that Christ has returned to the Father's side and has left us to be his body, to carry on his work. And perhaps we need our minds and eyes opened and enlightened to see the world with fresh eyes. To find ourselves in the places Jesus found himself. To go back to the basic starting place, think about what Christ would say, think about what Christ would do.

You see, we have become an indoctrinated people. No matter what we see or no matter what someone else says, we have ready-made answers. We know how to come back with a counter-argument. We have our gotcha statements and questions. We know who to blame. We have old tired answers to old tired questions. It is time to set these down. It is time to enter the world like I and those pastors-in-training did back at Vassar hospital – with a sense of responsibility and the humility to lean on our mentors. To see the world and the ministry of Christ anew.

I think of our poem and how the speaker of the poem starts seeing his surroundings differently through what this eccentric person is seeing, swerving all over the road. And the result of his being thrown out of his rhythm is that this familiar landscape grows strange and gains fresh eyes and a fresh perspective.

Then all of a sudden the landscape
 you thought you knew like the back of your hand
 wrinkles. And you either clutch the steering wheel
 and stare straight ahead (pretending your destination
 hasn't changed forever) or you pull over, open
 a window, open all the windows, open your whole
 life, look up, look around, see things for the first time.

On this Ascension Day, let's remember. Let's not remember as in recall an old event that happened long ago. But remember as in act it out, step into it, conflate time, as if Christ is ascending today, and we turn back toward the world, seeing it anew, as Christ would, and relying only on the memory of what Christ would do and what Christ would say as our guide. And rather than clutching the steering wheel of our entrenched habits, being willing to see the world and our place in it anew. And like Thom's smirk, or Trudi's glee at my discomfort, I see a little glint of confidence in Christ's eye as he ascends and he sends us out to be his disciples in the world. And in there in the moment, there is no point in protesting the plan; we just go, learning on the fly.

Luke 24: 36-53

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

The Ascension of Jesus

⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Ephesians 1: 15-23

Paul's Prayer

¹⁵ I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.