



"Passing the Baton"
Scripture – Luke 24:44-53
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 16, 2021

Nearly 600,000 Americans have died from Covid-19 and officially 3.5 million have perished worldwide, but some estimates go as high as ten million. In our country the future definitely looks brighter as millions get vaccinated and the number of cases diminish. However, in the past 15 months, far too many have been forced into premature farewells as their loved ones succumbed to this deadly virus. And, as we know, some of the good-byes, even in our church family, have been especially grim because people could not be physically present with their loved ones at the end.

Today's text from the Gospel of Luke is a farewell scene. It marks the occasion when Jesus bids his disciples adieu. He has appeared to them following his resurrection demonstrating that his death was not the end and that they could live with the hope of life beyond the grave. Now it is time to depart.

Luke's account is brief and provides few details, but it could not have been an easy goodbye. The disciples have spent three years with Jesus and lived at a level of intensity difficult to fathom. They have trekked many miles together and along the way they have been captivated by his wisdom, amazed at his magical touch, and gradually learned the power of sacrificial love.

The ascension of Jesus is not merely an ancient tale describing how people in a pre-scientific era believed the resurrected Jesus was beamed up to heaven – as if heaven is a place just above the clouds. No, this is a pivotal event in the Christian story. It depicts the moment when the mission of Jesus was handed off to his followers. It symbolizes the passing of the baton, and the start of a relay that has lasted centuries. Jesus has shown us the way. Now, it's up to us to carry on his mission.

Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Spanish mystic wrote, "God of love, help us to remember that Christ has no body on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world. Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone. Ours are the feet with which (Christ) is to go about doing good."

I suspect the ascension of Jesus is not a favorite story of those who want to leave everything to God. It's not a top ten pick of those who think being spiritual means to tell God to clean up our messes. God may love us like children, but God expects us to assume responsibility like grown-ups.

The ascension of Jesus marks the moment when we received our marching orders. Jesus said, "Through you the homeless will be sheltered and the hungry fed. Through you the sick will be healed and the grief-stricken

comforted. Through you the weak will be protected and the oppressed set free. Through you the faith will be spread and the ways of God will become known.”

Being handed such tremendous responsibility is sobering. Those first disciples may have wanted to protest: “Jesus, you really cannot expect us to handle all of this!”

But before they could voice their trepidation, Jesus said, “Even though I will no longer be physically present with you, you will not be alone. Go to Jerusalem and wait. Soon you will receive the power you need – the strength, the courage, and the hope you need.”

Then the text says that after Jesus departs, the disciples return to Jerusalem with great joy. That concludes Volume 1 of Luke’s writings and sets the stage for Volume 2: The Acts of the Apostles. It is in Acts that we read of the transformation that took place in the followers of Jesus. These previously indecisive and panic-prone individuals were transformed into intrepid and energetic witnesses who created the first Christian communities and began to spread the faith against staggering odds.

The disciples realized what each of us must realize: that God calls us to live a rich and beautiful life. We are to make the most of our remaining time on earth, by embarking on an amazing adventure with God.

Who would have thought that the heart of this passage could be found today in a commercial from the Super Bowl? As you know, some people hone in on the **ads** during the big game more than they do the action on the field. Companies know that as many as 100 million people will watch them pitch their product, so they try to produce something that will leave an impression. The competition for the cleverest commercial is as fierce as the game itself. The day after the Super Bowl, people recap the game and what they believe was the key to victory. But many also weigh in on who they thought won the clash of commercials.

In the 2020 Super Bowl, Google had a 90 second message that reached out and pulled you in. It began with the television screen looking like a computer screen when you do a Google search. As a piano plays in the background, letters are typed into the line where you would do your search. The letters say “How to not forget.”

Then, you hear the voice of an elderly man who says, “Hey Google, show me photos of me and Loretta.” A photo appears on the screen that shows a 70-something man hugging his wife. Then, a photo appears of the couple when they were in their 50s and the man chuckles, “Remember, Loretta hated my mustache.”

Another photo appears. This one shows him holding a fish that his wife has caught, and the man says, “Remember, Loretta loved going to Alaska.”

The elderly man gives another voice command: “Show me photos from our anniversary.” On the screen we see photos of a much younger couple. The colors have faded with time, but we see smiles and laughter. The pictures reveal the many good times they had over the years.

He gives another voice command, “Play our favorite movie” and we see a touching scene from a Humphrey Bogart film as he is about to part from his lover.

Words begin to appear on the screen. “Loretta’s favorite flowers were tulips.” “Loretta had the most beautiful handwriting.” “Loretta used to say tickled pink.” And the final words: “Loretta always said, don’t miss me too much, and get out of the dang house.”

That struck me as similar to what the Gospel of Luke is trying to capture in this final scene of Jesus with his disciples. When Jesus departed, they surely reflected on the memorable moments they had spent with Jesus. They recalled the first time their eyes landed on him and how he called them to follow who knows where. They reflected on times when he told a zinger parable, when he shocked the authorities, when he healed people who suffered, when he taught massive crowds, when he defied tradition, and when he showed the courage of a lion by confronting the rulers who were persecuting the poor.

They must have told stories of happy times when they joked with one another and when Jesus put a self-righteous blowhard in his place. I'll bet they talked about unforgettable moments when Jesus turned someone's life in the right direction. Don't you wish you could have overheard them talking about how Jesus had changed their lives?

The time they had with their master did not last long enough. When you love someone deeply, it does not matter how many years you have together. It's never enough, is it?

Today's passage is the final "Good-bye." Yet, it is not the devastating ending to a tragic story. The disciples do not walk away to their separate homes and spend their final years in despair. They do not waste their years dreaming of what could have been if the authorities had not brought a premature end to their teacher's life. No, their takeaway from their final moments with Jesus must have been similar to what this elderly man took from his deceased wife. "Don't miss me too much, and get out of the dang house."

The focus of our faith is not on what happened 2,000 years ago when Jesus walked the earth. It is not on a long list of "Thou shall nots" or a prescription for sucking the fun out of life. The focus of our faith is on how the words of Jesus inspire and transform us today, and how the Spirit of Jesus guides us to points of purpose and sparks within us joy and hope.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

O Lord, you are our God and King! Your works do give you thanks, Eternal One; with all creation, we lift our voices to bless your holy name. You, O God, are Maker of Heaven and Earth — of all that is, seen and unseen. You are robed in majesty, clothed in strength. And still you draw near to us! You come — as pillar of cloud and through prophet's call; with wind and flame, and in the Word-made-flesh. You come, O Lord, to draw us close to you.

We give thanks that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens on our behalf. Jesus knows our weakness as well as our pain; he showers us with mercy and encircles us with love. He reveals the very character of God, and draws us into the divine embrace. So, with boldness, we approach the throne of grace.

Merciful God — Your love is strong enough to transform lives and to heal the world. As we pray for your world in need, break our hearts for what breaks yours. We bring before you those who are grieving, and we pray for your comfort that wipes away every tear. We bring before you those who despair, and pray for your hope that illumines possibility. We bring before you those who are sick, and pray for your healing of body, mind, and spirit. We bring before you a world plagued by violence, and pray for your spirit of peace to enter all our hearts.

God, draw near to the peoples of Palestine and Israel, whose lands are — once again — embroiled in conflict. Where there is chaos, bring calm; where there is suffering, bring comfort; where there is indifference, bring compassion; where there is any openness to resolution, bring wisdom; where there is hatred, bring love. Inspire

Israelis, inspire Palestinians, inspire all the world to work together for justice and peace, that — one day — this holy land may reflect your vision of *shalom*.

God, you created in love, you redeem for love, you sustain with love. Help us to love in the same way that you love us — with passion, with fierce hope, with challenge as with comfort. We pray in the name of the one who showed us how to love, the one who taught us how to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.