

Grace Episcopal Church Galena IL
May 8, 2016

Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Texts--Acts 1: 1-11, Luke 24: 44-53

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This ordinary/extraordinary week we said farewell to the longest time member of our church community. To Carl Edwards. And we soon will do the same for another beloved member, Levon Jackman. And also, at the end of this ordinary/extraordinary week we will celebrate the four children we baptized this year with the United Churches' dedication of a tree in the park.

This ordinary/extraordinary week, there are those among us who breathe sighs of relief for loved ones whose surgeries, treatments, or tests have had positive outcomes. And others who still wait and wonder with anxiety.

This ordinary/extraordinary week, here at church we wait and prepare for the next round of seeking approval for our parish house plans. At the same time, we proceed with plans for summer worship, for budgets and stewardship, for the hopes and dreams ahead when the path may have become clear. Some of what we plan will be familiar, tried and true. Some will be new, unknown and, maybe, risky or unanticipated.

In the midst of such an ordinary/extraordinary week, how do we make room for a long ago story of Jesus ascending into heaven like magic on a cloud, for heaven's sake! All eyes looking up, and up, and up as he levitates and disappears. It is the substance of TV or movies, with special lighting and music to add to the mystery. We can just see it in the renaissance paintings, in the frescoes and stained glass windows in cathedrals, and above our own altar. It doesn't feel much like the real day-to-day, nitty-gritty stuff of our lives. And yet, what better time for this story? It is the perfect story for us this week. It is, after all, all of one piece—the disciples' story and ours. It is about sadness and fear, joy and celebration, confusion and clarity. It is about recollection, anticipation, and moving on. It is the cycle of life and of faith.

The story is chock-full of symbols that would have had meaning for the disciples and for those of us who have studied the Hebrew Bible. And for all people, even though we modern types no longer view a world of three tiers of heaven, earth, and hell, where earth is the center of the universe, human beings seem to be fascinated with "up there." We have

explored space and learned how expansive the universe really is and yet, we often think of God as “up there,” a being beyond the limitations of human understanding. Like the long ago Canaanites who worshipped the god of the high places, the mountain god; like the ancient Greeks and Romans whose gods lived on Mount Olympus, we symbolically point to the heavens with our magnificent cathedral steeples or domes. So, maybe one of the things this ascension story brings us is an affirmation that just as God is with us, within us, and among us – imminent, God is also beyond us – transcendent.

Long ago, the disciples, after Jesus death and resurrection, reminisced about their times with him, how he had changed their lives. Then, through appearances to this select group, Jesus recollected for them the basic teachings about the realm of God, recapitulated their salvation history in order to prepare them for going on without his physical presence. Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures, for even though they were with him for three years, listening to his prayers, his sayings, and his parables, they were confused and uncertain. Even after this last forty days – an “intensive” on Jesus’ intentions and preparation for their roles, they still seemed to be expecting something else. “Is this the time, Jesus?” they asked him. Are you going to do it now? Are we there yet? What a shock it must have been to witness his departure.

This time for them was about recollection but it was also about anticipation and waiting . They were not to stand there looking up into the clouds or to get stuck in the recollection, looking backward and clinging to the past. They were to leave the mountainside and go back to Jerusalem to wait for the pouring out of power by the Holy Spirit that would equip them to carry on Jesus’ work.

Then came the uncomfortable and frightening part: the moving on and forward. How much easier it would have been to have just lived off of the good memories. How much safer it would have been to continue meeting privately, telling the good news stories only among themselves rather than going out to strangers who might be hostile. But they had to set aside old expectations and move into the future.

Familiar story, isn’t it? When we stand beside the bedside of the loved one whose earthly life is ending, we recollect. Within our own heart or with gathered family and friends, we recall good times and not so good, tender moments and hilarious ones. The look in the eye when a precious moment was shared, the loving word said at just the right time. When we sit in the school auditorium to see a child graduate or play that last recital or receive the coveted award, we remember. We remember all the hours of study and practice. The disappointment when someone else was chosen. The joy when this child was recognized. We remember seeing them off to the first prom, we fill our smart phone memory with pictures and remember further and further back: the birth, the first word, the first step, the very first day of school.

When we stand beside that bedside, we wait and anticipate. We don’t do very well with the waiting, with the unknown. We would rather move right on to the next stage, even if it is not what we would want. Because, at least the unknown is gone and we can start to deal with

the new reality, whatever it may be. We wait for the moment of death. We wait through the nine months of pregnancy and anticipate the birth of the new child. We wait for the child to come home from the first date or the first night out with the family car, for the college acceptance letter, or the marriage. Life will not ever be the same again. Like the disciples, though, we cannot get stuck in the past, in the memories as though there is nothing ahead for us. We must wait in faith and trust for what comes next.

When we leave that bedside, we must move on. Whether as a widow or widower, whether as a motherless or fatherless child taking our places as the older generation. When the child has gone on to college or a distant job, we are not forbidden to remember with thanksgiving and joy, but we must not stand still looking back instead of forward.

The story of Jesus Ascension is not the end of the story, just the end of a chapter. There are forty days from the resurrection to the Ascension. It is a symbolic number, forty, indicating completeness, the amount of time sufficient to accomplish a task, in this case teaching the disciples and readying them for their mission. Jesus' departure is necessary in order to move to the next phase, the age of the church.

The church is the continuation of Jesus' words and deeds. And the church is directed to the future that stretches out before it to spreading the gospel far and wide to Jews and Gentiles alike. And beyond even that, we have been promised the coming realm of God. But it has not been promised that it is here right now. Nor right then, 40 days after the resurrection. Everything has not been made all right and finished: we are not finished with troubles and tears, war and chaos, hatred and hostility. But the promise has been made of the ultimate outcome. Love and God's grace will have the final word. Jesus departed in body. But Jesus still lives, still is with us sending the Spirit to remind us that passively gazing into the sky for some apocalyptic solution is not what we are called to do. It was not so for the disciples whose waiting was about preparation to receive the Holy Spirit and move forward into their part of bringing God's realm into fulfillment. It is not so for us today.

God acts in the fullness of time. We recollect the good times, the wonderful memories and how we have—and are—shaped by them. We honor those we have loved and all we have shared with them. Sometimes our waiting and recollecting with them has prepared us for something new. Sometimes it has been active accompaniment and solidarity as we sit or pray with another who is waiting. Sometimes we are called to stay where we are, other times we are called to move on into the unknown and uncharted. In either case, we must not live as if God has nothing more for us in the future. We know that there are new memories to be made, new chapters to be written. Jesus has showed us that it is so! The disciples have showed us that it is so!

Amen.