

## Parting Words

Ascension Sunday May 13, 2018

Luke 24: 44-50; Acts 1:6-11

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Because Jesus ascended and sits at the  
right hand of God,  
a new world has broken into ours.  
Justice will come for the poor,  
freedom for the prisoners,  
healing for the sick.

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the  
right hand of God,  
a new community has been formed.  
Love and caring will flourish,  
The abandoned and rejected will be  
welcomed.

All people will find a place of belonging.  
Because Jesus ascended and sits at the  
right hand of God,  
a new creation has begun.

all that was distorted is being restored,  
all that was corrupted is being renewed,  
all that was broken is being made whole.

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the  
right hand of God,  
God's new world has begun.

Christine Sine <http://godspace-msa.com>  
Photo: Tom Balke.



Does anyone know what last Thursday was? Ascension Day.

In 27 years of ordained ministry, I have never preached on the Ascension of Jesus. We, in the Protestant church don't pay much attention to it. Perhaps we're uncomfortable with the fact that Jesus hung around for so long after his Resurrection and left again before sending in the Spirit. Perhaps some think it was sort of anti-climactic. He had already died, and now he's saying good-bye again. What gives? Instead, we Protestants put all our emphasis on Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday, 10 days after the Ascension.

Why was the act of Jesus' Ascension into Heaven so important to the disciples? What purpose did that encounter serve? And why is it still important for us all these years later? What is the significance of this point, 40 days after Jesus' Resurrection? And why did God wait 10 more days before sending the Holy Spirit to the followers?

I'll begin with a story. At ages 57, Airforce Colonel Bruce Hollywood had a severe heart attack. As he lay in the ambulance, two regrets popped into his head. One was that he wouldn't be able to help his son with his college applications. The other was that he never thanked the Japanese woman who gave birth to him, and then gave him up for adoption in 1960.

Like it would be for many of us, such a life event made him reprioritize some things.

Hollywood was adopted by an American couple who were stationed in Japan with the U.S. military, and who promised to offer him a good life back in the United States. They looked very different from him. He of mixed Japanese and American descent, and they of Irish and Norwegian roots.

For years, Bruce's adoptive mother had encouraged him to go and find his birth mother back in Japan. But, he had never felt the need to do so. And so he hadn't. But laying there in the ambulance facing a possible death, reminded him of her urging once again. His mother's powerful, loving message of hope and healing for years before her own death, were now somehow relevant and became a top priority.

Long story short, he survived his health scare, and went to work to see how he might locate his birth mother back in Japan. Time and time again, doors were closed. No one seemed to be able to help him. And then, one day, while waiting for a flight at Dulles airport, he met another officer, an admiral, at an airport bar. He, too, had was of American and Japanese descent. He offered to help Bruce through his connections with the US Embassy in Japan. Hollywood was not hopeful, but gave him the information. Only, days later, while at his desk at the Pentagon, Hollywood received a call from a tearful, Japanese-speaking woman who had been waiting for 57 years to hear her son's voice.

For the next few minutes, Hollywood listened to the interpreter and his mother. All he could make out was talking and sobbing.

"And I said, 'Stop, stop, stop. You've got to tell me what's going on,'" Hollywood recalled.

"And the interpreter said, 'Well, tomorrow is your mother's 65th birthday, and the birthday present that she dreamed of her whole life is that you would come back to her,'" Hollywood said.

*And then the interpreter said something Hollywood could barely believe. His mother ran her own business — a restaurant and bar she named Bruce.*

*"And I thought, 'This is either the most incredible story I've ever heard or this woman is crazy, and these things aren't true,'" Hollywood said.*

*It turned out, that in a gesture from one mother to another, his adoptive mother went to Nobue before they moved back to the United States and gave her a photograph of the baby. She said they had named him Bruce, and she promised to give him a good life.*

Well, you can imagine the rest of the story...they reunited not long after that and his life has never been the same. Bruce Hollywood brought Nobue over to visit in Washington many times before she died three years later ...of a heart attack. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/good-news/he-searched-for-his-japanese-birth-mother-he-found-her---and-the-restaurant-she-had-named-after-him/ar-AAwWxuM?ocid=spartanntp>

Here's why I share that story. It was his adoptive mother's message of hope and healing that came to him at the pivotal point in his life which encouraged him to fulfill his calling, in a sense.

Let's look at what Jesus said to his closest followers, not at the time of his death, but after they had grieved and had a chance to reaffirm their bond together.

Jesus' parting words to them before his Ascension: 1. All I have done has been to fulfill the law from the scriptures: the Christ is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day; repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name beginning right here at home in Jerusalem; 2. You are my witnesses to these things 3. If you're afraid you won't be able to do this, I am sending you power...the Holy Spirit, my spirit to give you the ability in the face of difficulties. 4. Stay here together and pray until that power comes.

What does it mean for us?

We begin with a relationship with God, as beloved children and baptized into God's incredibly diverse family.

We've been tasked with our ministry: to be witnesses to the life, message and ministry of Jesus which was about love, grace, forgiveness, transformation, inclusion

We need each other in community to support one another, to pray with one another and to remind each other what we're about.

We need to be honest with each other and offer the life-giving opportunity of forgiveness and renewal, especially if we are to offer that message beyond our walls.

We're promised the power to do the ministry to which we are called, and what to say.

What does that look like practically speaking? Yesterday I saw an interview with Professor Eddie Glaud of Princeton University, who described our country as currently experiencing a "Corrosion of the soul" and "a hardened heart." I agree. And a lot of it comes around the issue of race.

It's been a bad couple of weeks for being Black in the United States of America.

1. April 25, in York, Pennsylvania: 5 African American women who were a golf team were at their club, when a party of white men asked them to move along or move out of the way. Seems they were taking too long, which would be annoying. According to the reports, though, the party in front of the women had taken a break and then men behind them hadn't even teed off yet. One of the men who complained to the women was the 30ish co-owner and offered to refund their memberships after calling the police on them.
2. May 2 in Philadelphia: A Starbucks employee called police when two African American men came in to use the rest room and then have a business meeting. They didn't purchase anything, and were accused of loitering. Apologies later given by Starbucks CEO and police after a video went viral of the arrest.
3. May 5 at Colorado State University: A white woman on a college tour called campus police when she was nervous over two Native American young men who arrived late for a college tour and were too quiet. (they said they had gotten lost and were extremely shy; they were asked to leave the tour) apologies by college officials, a re-invite and a change to tour procedures
4. May 7 in Rialto, California: A white neighbor called police after "being afraid" when 3 African Americans were leaving the house across the street with suitcases. They didn't wave to her. She hadn't waved either. The two female and one male artists were checking out of the house which was an Airbnb;
5. May 8 in Brentwood, NJ: Store clerks at Nordstrom Rack called police on 3 African American teens shopping for prom clothing, falsely accusing them of stealing. Apology by Nordstrom CEO
6. May 8 at the University of Florida, Gainesville: at graduation an official manhandled a student dancing across the stage to get his diploma.
7. May 9 at Yale University in New Haven: A white graduate student came across an African American woman sleeping in a common area and called police, saying she had no right to be there...assuming she was an intruder; The African American woman is a fellow grad student and was taking a break from writing a paper. She was held for 15 minutes ; her male friend, also, a Yale grad student, was stopped back in February by the same white woman, in the same housing complex, where he lives, and accused of not belonging there. Police were called then as well.
8. In Oakland, California: A white woman calls police on a family barbequing at a park, saying that they aren't allowed to use charcoal grills in that area of the park (which is true) and threatens them with jail; the family starts videoing the exchange as she calls the police; When the police arrive 2 hours later, the white woman cries to them saying she is the victim of harassment.

9. Just this morning, there is a story about a woman from Nigeria travelling on a United Airline flight from Houston to SF with her two children. They were on the third leg of their flight to Ontario for an appointment with a potential boarding school. When the mother went to her assigned seat in business class, a white man sitting there would not move, so the attendants asked her to move to another seat in business class. Later, when she went to use the restroom, the man stood in front of her seat and would not let her sit down again. The flight attendant came and asked her to exit the cabin. Another airline employee told her she was being removed from the flight because the man had complained her smell was pungent and he was uncomfortable flying with her.

Friends, unfortunately this isn't new. We are broken as a society when people treat each other this way. Racism is precisely what the loving and living God calls the church to stand up to and heal.

Theologian Richard Rohr addresses it this way...This is the reason we ought to find a church and attend it: "There is no other form for the Christian life except a common one. Until and unless Christ is experienced as a living relationship between people, the Gospel remains largely an abstraction. Until Christ is passed on personally through faithfulness and forgiveness, through concrete bonds of union, I doubt whether he is passed on by words, sermons, institutions, or ideas." —Richard Rohr

Community is the context of dynamic ministry. It is authentic and powerful when we are real and honest about our humanity. When we own our own failures, in this case our own tendency to be fearful of others, our own sin, then we can speak and act with the power of love. The co-moderator of our denomination recently wrote this:

*Every person is broken but we expend a lot of energy hiding that truth. I'm convinced that the more church members pretend like they do not struggle with spiritual doubts/addiction/mental illness/bankruptcy/unemployment/imperfect children/bitterness/marriage problems/greed, the more that congregation resembles a social club.*

*When we fail to admit the ways in which we are broken, it's almost impossible to serve other people without feelings of superiority. "I have it all together so I will deign to help people with cancer/in prison/who are homeless."*

Indeed, authentic ministry comes from a place of humility.

The book of Acts is attributed to Luke as well. In the Ascension text, the disciples ask if Christ would restore the kingdom right then. Oh no, he says. You have a role in this. I have shown you and taught you what to do. I will send you power from the Holy Spirit, so that YOU can be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. And then he was raised up right in front of them.

They sat there. Stunned. Then two men in white appear to them saying, "Why are you looking up?" Go and wait together and I will send you power...So they returned. And what did they do? They gathered together as the followers, and they prayed, and prayed... For a long time. They listened for what they needed to do. This was the backdrop to tremendous ministry which would soon flow forth from them when the Holy Spirit came to empower them a few days later.

Jesus' parting words need to guide our life together: You are witnesses to what I am about; you need each other...so go and gather and pray; and then get to work, but don't worry, I'll give you the strength to do what you need to do.