

Ascension Joy

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The Sunday of the Ascension
May 12, 2013

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

“And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” -- Luke 24:52

Today is Ascension Sunday in the Christian calendar, and it's Mother's Day in the civil calendar. Both days revolve around important relationships that inevitably include love, change, loss, and gain. Let's devote a few minutes this morning considering those features of our relationship with our mothers and our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Our mothers are the doorways to earthly life. Despite what your parents may have told you, you were not found under a cabbage leaf. Each of us was born into this world of a mother, establishing a bond between mother and child that even death itself cannot break. I speak from experience here, since my own mother died forty-eight years ago and I dreamed of her just the other night. And, as many of you know, my sister, Sandy, died last Sunday, and her four grown children are much on my heart this morning, as there is no Mom for them to call or send flowers to for the first time in their lives. And I know that some of you are feeling a similar loss this morning, and have perhaps felt it for many years.

So this morning's gospel reading from Luke, with its notice that the disciples returned to Jerusalem rejoicing after Jesus's ascension, may sound a bit puzzling to many of us. Why would Jesus's disciples be rejoicing at Jesus's departure from their physical lives? Wouldn't mourning have been a more emotionally appropriate response? That's how the prophet Elisha responded when the prophet Elijah was swept up by the divine horsemen and chariots of Israel. With rare exceptions, when a loved one leaves us, for whatever reason and in whatever fashion, don't most of us experience pain rather than joy at their departure?

A few years ago, I preached a sermon for our graduating seniors as they were about to depart for college. When I got to the bit about the peculiar sadness their families were feeling at that transition, I got a bit weepy, so I stopped preaching such sermons after that, and now we recognize our graduating seniors, as we will recognize Gabby Nedrow in a few weeks, slightly differently and, I think, more inclusively.

But I hope that one of the life lessons all parents learn about the transition of their children from living at home to living on their own is that the best is yet to be. The purpose of childhood is adulthood, and no responsible parent works hard to keep her or his child a child. Childhood has its happy moments and happy memories, to be sure, and we should all do our best to ensure such moments and memories for both children and parents; but life's beginning is not its end in either sense of that word.

The greatest joy most parents tell me they receive from parenthood is watching their children's lives unfold as the adults they will spend most of their lives being. More than one of you has said to me how delightedly surprised you are when your child says or does something mature, responsible, or compassionate that makes you pause and say, “This is *my* child?”

Those are the moments most parents live for, and they are a source of deep joy. The little girl or little boy you worked hard to raise is gone, and in her or his place is a young woman or young man who can take your breath away in love and admiration. The physical needs for which they depended on you are largely a thing of the past, and without anyone's realizing it, spiritual needs have taken their place. Your grown-up children look to you for the same kind of love, guidance, inspiration, correction, and support we look to our friends and God for, and when you realize that that is the relationship you now have with your child – that you are friends as well as family – you realize that one kind of loss has yielded another kind of gain, and that what you have in your life now is much more than what you had in your life before.

Jesus's ascension is, I think, about that kind of transition. It's about the change in his relationship with his followers from essentially physical to essentially spiritual. The days of his resurrection appearances are drawing to their close, and in their place he promises a new kind of relationship that doesn't depend on what the disciples can sense physically. It's a spiritual reality that the world can neither create nor destroy. It's a reality that transcends the mundane, and nothing in this world, including death, can sever us from that reality if we make it our own.

That, I believe, was the source of the disciples' joy. The childhood of their relationship with Jesus was gone, and in its place was their adulthood of mature spirituality. That's the transition we all have to make if we don't want to spend our time on this earth as religious babies.

"In thinking," Paul told the Corinthians, "be mature," and true maturity means living spiritually as well as physically awake.

It means standing on one's own two feet and accepting responsibility for one's feelings as well as one's behavior.

It means accepting, without complaint, the full consequences of one's actions.

It means making decisions more from a perspective of generous empathy with others than from a timorous clinging to rules, whether those rules be the rules of the state, the rules of church governance, or the rules of the Bible.

Spiritual maturity means expanding the sphere of one's concerns relentlessly, and resisting the perpetual temptations of tribalism and parochialism.

It means being strong enough and courageous enough and patient enough and wise enough to break the cycle of violence with non-violence.

Being spiritually mature means at least all of this and a great deal more, and it is not for the infantile, the foolish, or the faint of heart.

Jesus of Nazareth went away so that we might grow in the spirit of Jesus the Christ, which is simply to say so that we might grow up. One type of relationship with him ended so that another type might begin, a type not subject to physical constraints. The reality of an ascended Christ is a reality of unlimited possibility, which is why he was perceived by those men of Galilee as going up into heaven, which is the Bible's way of speaking of the infinitely possible. Heaven is not about geography; if it were, as bishop John Shelby Spong said years ago, Jesus's ascension straight up means he's not in heaven, he's in orbit.

Heaven is about God and our relationship with God, and heaven is the shorthand word we use to describe the infinite, eternal nature of that relationship when we get the things of earth out of the way. That clearing away of the distracting non-essentials takes commitment and practice and sacrifice, but the reward, Jesus said, is a pearl of great price. It's a way of life earnestly to be desired, joyously to be lived, and gratefully to be shared. It's a life-changer. Why not let it change yours?