

## Joyful Farewell

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

Some of you are doubtless familiar with the old saying about overnight guests: you’re glad to see ‘em come, you’re glad to see ‘em go.

Today’s text from the Gospel of Luke reminded me of that saying. Our text says of Jesus’ disciples at his ascension into heaven, “And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.”

I’m not sure that the disciples were glad, exactly, to see Jesus ascend into heaven, but when Luke says, here in the last few verses of his gospel, that Jesus’ disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy, he constructs a literary frame that encloses the story of Jesus with joy.

Remember what the angel said to the shepherds when Jesus was born, according to Luke? “For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a savior, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).

Joy accompanied Jesus’ arrival, and joy accompanied his departure. The key word that opens Jesus’ life story and closes it is joy: people rejoiced at his arrival, and they rejoiced at his departure, and it wasn’t because they were glad to be rid of him. Jesus’ followers returned to their lives in Jerusalem accompanied by joy because they knew that through their experience with Jesus the Christ – his birth, his life, his teachings, his passion, his death, and his resurrection and return to them, through all of that – they had been given a new lease on life. They had been given new and better lives because they had accepted Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, and his departure from them signaled not their abandonment, but rather their liberation: they were now free to start living the kind of life they had witnessed in him and were now witnessing to others in his name, and that, for them, was a source of joy.

Now, I realize, of course, that many of our farewells are marked by sadness. I conduct enough funerals to know what leave-taking looks like in its most profound form, and there is almost always a significant element of sadness involved.

But there is another kind of leave-taking, occurring all around us in this season of graduations. That’s the farewell between the teachers and the taught. Whether as parents or as teachers, we teach young people not to make them dependent on us, but precisely to do the opposite – to make them independent of us, to allow them to begin constructing fully functional adult lives for themselves, having been prepared by us, as best we could, for that awesome and magnificent task.

That’s one of those bittersweet ironies of life for which every parent and every teacher has to prepare her- or himself. We educate people not to keep them with us, and not even to fashion them in our own image. We educate people and give them life-coping skills precisely so that they can be themselves – so that they have the tools to fashion, for themselves, a life worth living. And that life, of necessity, will be wholly and entirely theirs. It cannot and should not be ours. For better and for worse, the life for which we prepare young people is theirs and theirs alone, and our hope and our prayer for

them is that they will make that life as they and only they can, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

And if we have done our job as we should have done, they will be ready and we will be ready. They will be ready for specialized training, for entering into meaningful labor, and for forming significant and profitable relationships. We, for our part, will be ready to let them do that, with all the risks and missteps that such a process must necessarily entail.

And life holds few greater rewards than watching that process unfold. Parents tell me that it is an unending source of joy to them to hear their children say things and witness them do things that are all grown up. Yes, the baby is gone and that part of a parent's identity with it, but the young adult who now engages you is such a wonder, most of us are astonished that we had any part at all to play in that miracle.

The scene that Luke is describing as Jesus' ascension is a commencement rather than an interment – and it's commencement for Jesus' followers. Ascension day marked the start of the lives for which their time with Jesus on earth had prepared them.

This was what his teachings were for – to enlighten them, not him.

This was what his miracles were for – signs for them, not for him.

This is what his suffering and death and resurrection were for – to show them the path to allow them to break, once and for all, the cycle of violence.

All of that came to fruition on ascension day. Jesus' ascension was the moment for which his life was the preparation. His mission and ministry were to prepare followers to carry forward his redemptive work of reconciling the world to its creator, and that redemptive work could only begin when his disciples turned their gaze from him to the world he had prepared them to serve.

That's why the two men in white robes rhetorically asked the disciples why they were standing looking up into heaven. Following Jesus' disappearing ankles into the clouds is not what he prepared them for. They were to look around, not up. The mission field is not heavenly, it's earthly, and the two-fold promise of Jesus to his disciples then and to us now is this: he has not abandoned us, and he has provided us with everything we need to accomplish his work on earth.

And that knowledge should be to any professing Christian a source of great joy. We have a task, a job to do, a mission to accomplish that will occupy us from now until the day we die. That task will require of us, sooner or later, every skill, every talent, and every single thing we have ever learned. Nothing falls outside the purview of the work of redemption.

Feeding the hungry – that's our job. Welcoming the stranger – that's our job. Speaking truth to power – that's our job. Advancing God's realm on earth – that's our job. Helping to birth God's new creation – that, too, is our job. When you graduate from Jesus school on ascension day, the job opportunities are literally endless.

And those opportunities mean that we get to choose, we get to decide how we're going to follow the urging of the Holy Spirit. Each of us gets to decide how she or he will be the follower of Jesus Christ that only she or he can be. Each of us is the earthen vessel that holds the treasure of the gospel, and no two of those vessels are alike. Each one of us has been shaped uniquely by the combination of biology, experience, and will, and that unique shape is what we bring to the jigsaw puzzle of life.

I know that many of you think that when you hear me endorse Paul's words in Galatians – "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" – that I am urging you somehow to divest yourself of your personality. That's not at all the case. In the first place, you can't, and in the second place, you shouldn't, because your personality is the raw material with which the Holy Spirit works. Your ego is not you, but your personality is, and it is your ego from which you need to free yourself so that God can work with the unique and precious personality that's left.

And that's the reason Jesus got out of our way on ascension day. There comes a moment in every person's life when you have to stop trying to please a parent or a teacher or some other authority figure and you have to start living the life for which that person tried so hard to prepare you. And how

you'll do that, finally, will not be up to them; it'll be up to you. And the only way for you to do that is for the person who prepared you to get out of your way.

I think perhaps that's what Paul meant when he told the Philippians, "Continue to work out your own salvation, with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his purpose."

Every parent knows the days of fear and trembling, when we wonder if we've done right by our children. But every parent also knows that if we don't let them go, they'll never be able to be the people God intends them and, with our help, created them to be. There is such a thing as a joyful parting even if it is sometimes accompanied by tears.