

“Is this Goodbye?”

Acts 1:1-11

“...As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” (Acts 1:9).

And just like that – he was gone.

Or was he?

Jesus was still ascending when the slack-jawed disciples were chastised by a couple of white robed men for craning their necks skyward, unable to look away as Jesus got smaller and smaller and smaller...

It’s an image that reminds me of the much anticipated “field day” at my elementary school when I was kid. Before it was “un-kosher,” environmentally speaking, to release balloons into the sky, every year on field day, we kindergarteners through 6th graders each got to release our own balloon into the sky and watch it float away. It was this glorious explosion of blue and white balloons against an already cloud spotted blue sky. It was quite a sight.

But thinking back on it, I imagine it must have been quite a sight to see all of our little necks craning up towards the sky – squinting into the sun – trying to watch where *our* balloon was blowing away to. I remember we would all point at the last few left before they were all out of sight (the

stragglers)...and we all swore that that last balloon was the one *we* released. *“That one’s mine. No that’s mine. Maybe that one’s mine?”*

The cool thing about the balloon release – other than the excitement of hundreds of kids cheering as balloons floated away into oblivion – was that tied to each balloon was a postcard that said something like, *“This balloon is from (name), a student at Moss Haven Elementary School in Dallas, Texas. Where did you find me? Write your address on me, and a message, and mail me back to Moss Haven!”* One year we got a card returned from two states over. Must have been windy that day...

None of us knew how far our balloon would go...it could get caught in a tree in the playground, much to any child’s distress, or it could make it clear to Kansas. And none of us knew if our card would be returned at all. Our teachers helped us cope with this reality as we prepared for the project every year. They told us that it would be a wonderful surprise if our card was returned...but we shouldn’t expect it.

But, nonetheless, each of us released our balloon with the child-like hope that *our* card *would be* returned. My card never was returned. In seven

years. (*Can you tell I'm still torn up about this??☺*)

For a kid, letting go – releasing that balloon, was an act of faith. It was bittersweet. The minute our little hand released our tightly wound grip off of our balloon's ribbon...it was gone...swept up. And none of us ever could jump high enough to get it back.

Our text this morning doesn't say that the disciples were jumping up trying to grab Jesus and get him back. But it certainly gives us this image of shocked disbelief that their teacher and friend was leaving their sight...going up, up, and away. And, unlike us kids on field day, the disciples did not choose to release Jesus. They were not ready to loosen their grip on him. But he went nonetheless, on his own volition or on God's...and surely they must have been thinking: *“Is this it? Is this goodbye? Is he going away forever this time?”*

Remember, they had to say goodbye to Jesus once already...around the table during that sacred last supper...before they watched their friend and teacher be killed. That was certainly not a welcome event. And they did not choose that goodbye either. They didn't want it and they didn't understand it. And then, of course, on the third day the unthinkable happens: he comes back.

If you've lost someone close to you,

you can imagine just how marvelous this would be: he comes back. Losing someone we love inevitably leaves us with that ache of wanting just want one last look...one last laugh or hug...one last 'I love you'...one last chance to breathe in their scent and their presence. But we only get that by listening to a recording of their voice, or smelling their favorite sweater, or reminiscing over photographs...and even then...it's not the same. It will never be the same. That's why saying goodbye to someone we love is so difficult. At least, it's difficult for those of us still on this side of eternal life.

Dr. Jack Kevorkian died on Friday. He was the single most polarizing figure in “end-of-life” debates in medical ethics' circles because of his medical practice that allowed terminally ill people to say goodbye to their own life – on their terms and in their timing. At the center of the controversy around Kevorkian's practice was the question of whether his patients were truly voluntarily asking for this treatment or if their psychological and emotional state was such that they couldn't “in good conscious” make this choice on their own. And then of course, there were the friends and family members who did not want to say goodbye to their loved one, even if their loved one was in their right mind and legitimately wanted this treatment.¹

¹ John Schwartz, “A Polarizing Figure in End-of-Life Debates,” *The New York Times* (5 June 2011) accessed on 5 June 2011 at

The hardest thing about death, as we have experienced as a church family and as will continue to experience, is that “saying goodbye” is a different experience for everyone. For some it is full of a sense of peace, even if painful...for others it is literally heart-wrenching and horribly haunting. There is a whole field of study in psychology and religion about “saying goodbye well” because no one, including the church, teaches us how to say goodbye to those we love.

And this is actually quite odd, since our faith hinges on the hope of life everlasting that comes once death has come first. And that hope that we have... is borne in the reality of Jesus’ resurrection...of Jesus dying, then reclaiming life as more powerful than death. Yet the resurrection is not the last significant act in Jesus’ life...although you’d think it given how much pomp and circumstance surrounds Easter. I would argue that Jesus’ ascension is an inextricable part of the on-going hope and life that we experience in Christ. So, Brian and Kevin and Joe...next year maybe we ought to call in the brass for Ascension Sunday and have a grand processional, and Calvary – maybe we all ought to wear our Sunday best and pack out the sanctuary on Ascension Sunday (although, really that should happen *every* Sunday)!

So - why is Jesus’ ascension so important? Well, it’s not because it’s a celebratory event like the

resurrection when Jesus comes back among us to teach and minister and heal again. (“*Oh good – it wasn’t goodbye! He’s back...whew!*”) It’s because the ascension is a life-changing and challenging event: Jesus, having come from God, goes back to God, and we, his disciples, are left...slack-jawed and all...by ourselves. Again. But Jesus does not leave us by ourselves to grieve his absence. Jesus leaves us by ourselves so that his incarnational presence might be fully born in us as we carry out the very ministry of love that he embodied. **Perhaps the Ascension Story teaches us how to say goodbye to one who has been among us and yet not lose that person’s spirit and influence in our life.**

The heart of the message of the Book of Acts...is that the Story of Jesus goes on...and the book of Acts is not a Gospel, it’s not Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John – it doesn’t tell stories about the amazing things Jesus did and the challenging things Jesus taught and the radical ways Jesus loved. No – *Acts* tells the story of how Jesus lives on – in and through us – the Church – the people who call ourselves Christ-followers – even here at Calvary, we proclaim that we are a “*Christ-like community that experiences and shares God’s love.*”²

Acts begins with Jesus saying “good bye.” Jesus leaves his *disciples* so that

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/us/05suicide.html>.

² Mission Statement of Calvary Baptist Church of Denver, 5 June 2011.

they can become *apostles*. On that day Jesus removes himself physically from their presence so that in his absence they can come into themselves and become what they are meant to be by his continuing grace.³

The word “disciple” in the Greek means *learner*, or *student*. The word “apostle” in the Greek means *one who is sent out...a messenger*, or *ambassador*. By definition, if you are a follower of Christ you are a disciple. But not all disciples take the challenging step to become apostles.

In this opening text in Acts, we hear Jesus charge his followers to move from the *posture of learning* into the *posture of leading*. Jesus challenges them to move from being ones who were ministers by living and learning in the presence of Jesus himself to ones who would become ministers empowered and enabled by the Spirit’s presence within them. Jesus goes from here (*point outward to the side*) to here (*point at heart*).

Did they know this was happening? No, I don’t think so. The text makes that clear. The disciples still want Jesus to do the work, “*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6). Jesus quickly replies that not only should they not worry about that – it’s not for them to know (or for that matter, for

³ George Mason, “Drafted,” *Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, TX* (28 May 2006). Accessed on 4 June 2011 at <http://www.wilshirebc.org/article240419.htm>.

Harold Camping⁴ and clan to predict either) – but Jesus also asserts that they themselves would soon receive the power of the Holy Spirit and be responsible for being his witnesses not just there in Jerusalem but to the ends of the earth!

And so how do they start their huge task of being witnesses...of being apostles? (*stand with mouth gaping open looking up for a few seconds*) By standing with their mouths gaping open – staring at the sky.⁵

2,000 years later we disciples are not all that different. We come to church to learn about Jesus and from Jesus...but taking that step from being a disciple to an apostle...from being a learner of the faith to becoming a leader in the faith...well, that requires a little more than just coming to worship and reading the Bible. That requires giving of our whole selves and our whole lives to God. That requires giving generously of our hearts in service to others, of our material resources in service of God’s kingdom, and of our own ambitions and longings in service of God’s will being done in our lives.

When do you find yourself standing

⁴Harold Camping predicted the end of the world would begin (via the rapture) on May 21, 2011, making headlining news all over the world. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_Camping.

⁵ Randle R. Mixon, “Acts 1:1-11: Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 2010, pg 496.

“looking toward heaven,” hoping that Jesus or someone/anyone will do the work you are called to do *for you*?

When do we pray to God to help the poor, when we could just make sandwiches and go feed the hungry ourselves or lobby our Congress to change policies? When do we pray for God to bring comfort or peace to a hurting friend, when God is really waiting for us to go visit that friend and embody the peace and presence of Christ to them ourselves?

What are the tasks that cause you to look around at others because you do not feel quite qualified for the job? Which, by the way, you’ll never ‘feel’ qualified when it comes to the Lord’s work...because the Lord is always calling us out of our comfort zones and into those places where it’s not comfortable. I keep a quote on my desk that reads, “*God doesn’t call the qualified, God qualifies the called.*”⁶ And here you thought you had some kind of preacher or pastor with credentials standing up here! Nope, I’m just a slack-jawed disciple like you – staring up at God, speechless sometimes, but forever working to follow God’s call into being a full-fledged apostle. If I waited until I felt qualified to do anything...I would be doing a whole lot of nothing.

Which is exactly why I think Jesus had to leave. Because what do we all do when we’re standing in the presence of an expert in any field? We

yield to them. We let them do the work and do the talking. Well, Jesus was the ultimate expert at embodying God’s love...given that he was Love Incarnate himself. So, perhaps he had to say goodbye in order for the disciples to stop relying on him and start realizing that they had ministry and work to do themselves.

So - when Jesus ascended was it really goodbye? Yes and no. It was goodbye to his physical presence walking and talking on this earth. But it was not goodbye to the fullness of his presence throughout the Church and throughout the world...in fact, it was just the beginning of ‘hello.’ (Stay tuned for more on that next week...Pentecost Sunday...)

Jesus gathered his disciples as a community, he taught them as a community, he broke bread with them as a community, he left from the midst of them in community, and the Spirit was promised to them in community.⁷

We can’t do it alone. At the Calvary Work Day yesterday morning, I was pulling weeds next to Mike Hammon Jahn, who was shoveling and hacking away at rock hard dirt trying to prepare an area outside our church for fresh mulch...in essence he was working hard to create a space for new life to grow. And at one point Mike paused and said, “*You know, they say “Many hands make light work,’ but we have many hands out*

⁶ Anonymous quote from personal quote book.

⁷ Mixon, *ibid.*

here – and this is definitely not light work. This is hard!” Very true. But at least we were sweating side by side and not working alone. (Albeit Mike lasted a lot longer out there than I did...as did many others!) The work may not be any easier on our backs or our muscles whether we are alone or in a group...but when we are working together perhaps the work sometimes does get done faster...or at least, in a more complete manner. Where one is weak (*Anne*), another is strong (*Mike*).

Living as a community of disciples and apostles – as the Church - does not make the individual work of any one of us easy. We are each called to task...called to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. No one gets a “pass” on that. In case you’re wondering – yes, you are qualified to be the presence of Christ to someone...to the world. No matter who you are and what you’ve done in the past or what you think you can or can’t do – I’m telling you now – you are qualified. So no excuses! ☺

And even though many of us being the hands and feet of Christ doesn’t make “light” work – it does create a community of encouragement and solidarity to not give up...and perhaps it even quickens the coming of the kingdom of God. No we don’t know when “*thy kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.*” So we keep praying. And we keep learning. And we keep serving. Together. And as we do, the love and light of Christ shines brightly to the world...so that the

world forever knows the continual “hello” and “welcome” of God. If we do not radiate the love and light of Christ...the world might just think God has indeed said “goodbye.”

It’s tempting to stand around slack-jawed and staring up at the sky waiting for God to make the world better. Friends, may we strive always to be a people who *recognize and exalt the power of Christ on high*, while *realizing and embodying the love of Jesus here on earth*.

Amen.