

The Blessing in Leaving

Luke 24: 44-53

Acts 1: 1-11

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The Ascension of Christ

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Luke 24: 44-53

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Acts 1: 1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

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In the mid 1990's the *Left Behind* books first came out and soon launched a multimedia franchise. It tells the story of the end times in which true believers in Christ have been "raptured" --taken instantly to heaven--leaving the world shattered and chaotic. It's graphic and intense as cars crash and planes fall from the sky as some drivers and pilots are raptured. An infant is raptured as he or she is moments away from birth. Someone is raptured in the midst of being assaulted. A bride is raptured as her groom is left behind. Over and over the world is in complete upheaval as those believers deemed worthy rise instantly to heaven, with the rest of humanity left behind to face the wrath and judgement of the end times.

This view of the end times is meant to wake up and scare those who are not followers of Jesus Christ as a powerful object lesson and warning. “Don’t let this be you.”

Yet the reality is we have already been left behind by Jesus. And it was a for a purpose and plan that had nothing to do with sorting saints from sinners. It had nothing to do with sudden human ascensions into heaven. Jesus was born into this world for a short time, for just a few years, to teach his followers of God’s kingdom, God’s realm, and of our place in bringing it into being. Jesus left us behind in order that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, would enable, strengthen and guide us to live as Jesus taught and commanded us to do as his followers:

-Love God, love one another

-Be humble, merciful, giving and forgiving

Had the risen Christ stayed on earth indefinitely we would have depended on Jesus to do everything for us, and we never would have learned to live as followers of Jesus. We would have never learned to live as the body of Christ.

We would not have to take responsibility for other people in need, in pain or distress; Jesus would do it.

We would not have to be responsible for gun control so that children in this country could go to school without risking their lives because the NRA offers our elected officials financial incentives to respond to mass shootings with nothing more than lip service; Jesus would do it.

We would not have to take responsibility for meeting the needs of those who are food insecure or babies in need of formula; Jesus would do it.

We would not have to take responsibility for our bodies or our behaviors; Jesus would heal us.

We would not have to bear responsibility for offending others or for our inappropriate actions; Jesus would fix them.

We would not have to be responsible for creation, for the care of the environment; Jesus would clean it.

Christ’s ascension reminds us that we have been left behind and entrusted to be a part of healing our broken world. Christ’s ascension did not leave us behind in a violent, startling way of car crashes and disappearing loved ones, but with a promise and a blessing. “I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

Theologian and poet Jan Richardson says this about the Ascension Scriptures: “As we spiral back around these stories this year, what takes hold of me is this: how Jesus prays for and blesses his friends as he leaves them. How the leaving is part of the blessing. As if the blessing can happen no other way than by his departure, by his letting go of the ones whom he has loved—these ones whom he will never cease to love but must release into their own lives, so that they may enter into the blessing and enact it on this earth.”

Jesus’ leaving is a part of his blessing as we who he will always love are released, are freed, are led, into our own lives to enter into his blessing and to embrace and enact it in our living. We are called to care for God’s creation, God’s people, and the inbreaking of God’s kingdom. We have the promise of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of Jesus Christ. As 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila wisely taught, “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses

all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

In Jerusalem, there is the Church of the Ascension, which is built upon the place where tradition says this took place. On the exact spot believed to be where Jesus last stood as he was about to ascend is a mark, an indentation, that once looked like a foot although that has not held up after all these centuries. Yet this foot mark is a powerful reminder and call. Look down here, not up there. What is here for us in the here and now of our lives is not up in the clouds but in the foot mark, the footprint, of Jesus.

Thousands of miles from Jerusalem we cannot see this footprint mark, but Jesus’ footprints are all over the gospels for us to see.

We can see Jesus’ footprints in the wilderness as he faces each temptation under the burden of hunger and thirst.

We see them northward across the West Bank to sit with the Samaritan woman at the well.

We see his footprints crossing to the other side of the Jericho road to bind up the wounds of the man beaten by robbers.

We see Jesus’ footprints beneath the sycamore tree, where he invited Zacchaeus to come down and walk over to his house together.

We see the large footprints of Jesus mingled with the tiny footprints of the children, the little ones he called to him as it is to them that the kingdom of God truly belongs.

We see the trampled footprints of Jesus among the thousands of others whose hunger was fed and satisfied by his teachings and a few loaves of bread.

We see the dirty, muddy footprints of Jesus all over the floor of the upper room where he washed the feet of his disciples.

We see the blood-stained footprints going up to Golgotha, loving us to the end.

It’s as if Jesus were leaving behind a road map for us to follow.*

As the left behind disciples stood transfixed as their teacher ascended, two angels, two men in white robes, asked why they looked heavenward when they had been given work and ministries to do on earth. Their life, our lives, are here on earth. Their responsibilities, our responsibilities, are here on earth.

Why do we stand looking up to heaven, when he’s left his footprints behind all over the place down here? Amen.

*Rev Gail Miller, Groton MA, 2018