

## **Blessing the Distance**

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Luke 24:44-53  
at First Baptist Church, Winston-Salem on Sunday, May 28, 2017*

I want to add one reading to our worship this morning, this one from the Book of Acts. Scholars teach us that the same writer of the Gospel of Luke also wrote the Book of Acts, almost as a sequel to Luke's gospel. It picks up almost right where Luke leaves off, concluding the story of Jesus with his ascension into heaven. The Acts account gives us just a bit more reaction from the disciples, so let us hear now the rest of the story. READ ACTS 1:6-11.

Let us pray. *God of love, help us to remember in the words of Saint Teresa of Avila,  
That Christ has no body now on earth but ours,  
No hands but ours, no feet but ours.  
Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world.  
Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone now.  
Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.<sup>1</sup>*

Today is Ascension Sunday in the life of the church, where we mark the transition of Jesus's departure from this earthly life to live and reign unbound by time and space. The events we read about today are where we get that line in the Apostles' Creed: "the third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and now sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." At his ascension, Jesus moved from earthly presence to cosmic Christ, and in so doing, became universally accessible far beyond his community of 1<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Prayer from Teresa of Avila:

[http://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa\\_Of\\_Avila\\_Christ\\_Has\\_No\\_Body.shtml](http://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Father Richard Rohr in The Work of the People's video, "Limiting God,"

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/limiting-god>

century Palestinian companions.

It's like the great author and theologian G. K. Chesterton once said, "great truths can only be understood on small stages."<sup>2</sup> God is always in the business of zooming in and expanding out, of becoming flesh and hovering in mystery, of localizing and globalizing. Nowhere do we see that more fully than in the One we call Jesus Christ. For the profound truth of Jesus is that he was specific – growing and teaching and ministering in and through a particular time, a particular place, a particular people, a particular set of experiences. And just as much as he was specific, Jesus was and is general – giving and saving and redeeming and transforming all things and all people in all places at all times.

But before we get to the general, let's remember the specific location of Jesus and his disciples on that Ascension Day. For the disciples who had walked with Jesus, sharing meals with him and healing with him, watching him die and come back to life, this moment of ascension had to have confused and even upset them again. Surely the elation of his resurrection had begun to lull them back into nostalgia. Again, they were walking the road together. Again, they were breaking bread. Again, they were studying scripture and catching glimpses of God in their midst. After the trauma of crucifixion, they were finally starting to breathe again. "Things are back to the way they used to be!," I bet they said to each other.

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Father Richard Rohr in The Work of the People's video, "Limiting God," <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/limiting-god>

So when Jesus gathered them up and took them to Bethany, as Luke tells us, just imagine all the memories that crossed their mind. Bethany, you see, was the place where Jesus's friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived; the place where Mary anointed his feet as he neared the end of his life; the place from which Jesus began his Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem; and now the place that would mark his earthly departure. I wonder if Bethany had been a place of rest and familiarity for Jesus during his life. Was Mary, Martha, and Lazarus's home the place where Jesus knew he would be welcomed with a tight hug and a warm meal? Was it the place where he could for once not be 'on,' where he and his friends could even be together without needing to say a word? Was it the place where he could rest in who he is and ready himself for who he must become?<sup>3</sup>

It seems significant to me that Jesus departed from Bethany, a detail important enough that the writer of Luke would be sure to include it. Because from this place of intimacy, the disciples find separation; from familiarity, newness. Jesus's ascension thrust the disciples again into a new finality that they were only just discovering, one without the earthly presence of Christ. While Luke tells us that they worshiped God and glorified Christ, Acts paints a slightly different picture, one where the realization of Jesus's departure left them questioning everything and gazing confounded to heaven. Whether

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<sup>3</sup> A beautiful reading of the significance of Bethany to Jesus can be found here: <https://thelisteninghermit.com/2012/05/16/ballast-from-bethany-ascensionb/>

they knew it or not, the disciples and all of Jesus's followers to come were entering into an "in-between place," the space between his departure and his coming again.

You know what in-between places are. New high school graduates are in-between adolescence and young adulthood. Expectant parents are in-between independence and dependence. Travelers go from one city to the next. Retirees leave behind a sense of identity to take on a new rhythm and pace for living. On this Memorial Day, we acknowledge the in-between place where families lose a loved one and have to relearn everything. Even churches and countries and organizations experience in-between places, where what has been and what will be seem like two unresolvable truths. And all that space between, all the crossings in which one thing ends and another begins, these thresholds are called liminal spaces. As people localized to a certain time and place, we are constantly in these in-between, liminal spaces in our lives.

The word "liminal" comes from the Latin word "limina," which means "threshold" or "doorway." They are the small spaces you occupy when you're leaving one place yet not quite entering another, the spaces where you've outgrown the old but don't yet fit the new. Liminal spaces are disorienting and ambiguous, spaces where a great complexity of emotion emerges: fear, excitement, confusion, sadness, and hope.<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Ferguson once said, "It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in-between that we fear ... it's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when

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<sup>4</sup> John O'Donahue has a transcendent essay on thresholds in *To Bless the Space Between Us*, p49.

his blanket is in the dryer. There's just nothing to hold on to.”<sup>5</sup> Richard Rohr calls liminal space “the place of waiting... a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the Biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer.”<sup>6</sup>

It could be easy to simply fear the in-between places of our lives, to try and hurry through them and resolve all the dissonances they create. But as John O'Donahue tells us, “no threshold need be a threat, but rather an invitation and a promise. Whatever comes, the great sacrament of life will remain faithful to us, blessing us always with visible signs of invisible grace. We merely need to trust.”<sup>7</sup>

Within Celtic spirituality, there is another term for the in-between places: “thin places.” The Celts are known to say that heaven and earth are but three feet apart, but impossibly closer in the thin spaces. You've experienced them, I'm sure – those times and places and experiences where the presence of God is so palpable, you could almost reach out and touch it; when the veil between the human and divine seems to lift; when distance seems to collapse into abundant presence. Thin places are recognizable even to a secular world. *The New York Times* travel writer Eric Weiner wrote about his experience

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/24386-it-s-not-so-much-that-we-re-afraid-of-change-or>

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Ruth Haley Barton's *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*

<sup>7</sup> John O'Donahue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, p50.

in the world's thin places, calling them "locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we're able to catch glimpses of the divine ... places that beguile and inspire, sedate and stir, places where, for a few blissful moments I loosen my death grip on life, and can breathe again."<sup>8</sup>

My guess is that there in Bethany, there where Jesus and his disciples felt safe and loved and known, **the liminal space became a thin place**. The doorway where fear and confusion and disorientation could have left the disciples perpetually gazing aimlessly at the sky instead gave them a glimpse of the Divine at work. The threshold became a sacred invitation. And we'll see next week on Pentecost that this thin place of ascension led directly to the fire and wind of the Spirit, rushing in and through and among to breathe the church into being.

What might it take for *our* liminal spaces to become thin places? How might our thresholds be infused with that sort of holiness? Instead of paralyzing us with fear and doubt, how might God beckon you and me from doorways of our lives into the path of courage and grace? What blessing do we need to hear in order to bear witness to such transformation?

On this final Sunday of Eastertide, what if the blessing of ascension, the blessing of Jesus to his disciples and all his followers in all time and space, is that **we have what we**

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Weiner, "Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer," *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>

**need?** We have what we need! Like a parent who blesses her child on the thresholds of kindergarten or college or independence or marriage or parenthood or any number of changes, Jesus reminds us that we have what we need. We know who and whose we are, because God first called us beloved. We know the Way we are to go, because Jesus says, “I am the Way.” We know that we do not walk this road alone, because Jesus says, “I will not leave you orphaned; I will give you another Advocate, the Spirit of truth, who will be with you forever.” And finally we know that we have what we need, because Jesus says, “you don’t need to know exactly what God will do in time and space. You don’t need to understand how God is local and global, specific and general all at the same time. That’s not yours to fret about. What you do need to know is that the Holy Spirit will give you the power to bear witness to the ends of the earth, proclaiming repentance and the forgiveness of sins, shouting to all who will listen that God in Christ offers you new life and nothing less than transformation. You can do this! **Because I have given you what you need.**

My favorite movie as a child was the classic for people of all ages, *Mary Poppins*. You know the story. A family with a fretting mother and fiery father needs a nanny for their two slightly-precocious children, and Mary Poppins comes to their aid. Mary Poppins is not just any normal nanny, because with her, kids’ toys and clothes come to life while tidying up the nursery. People pop in and out of chalk drawings and join a horse

race to win. Raucous laughter leads an old man and his friends to rise to the ceiling. And in all these most unusual happenings with Mary Poppins, perhaps strangest of all is that a father gets his priorities straight, a mother softens to find joy and playfulness, and two children learn to listen and love well. As Jane and Michael look on Mary Poppins with fear about what life will look like without her, you can almost hear her whisper as she packs up her things into that big carpetbag of hers, “you have what you need!” And as the Banks family, newly bound up and not alone, goes gleefully together to fly a kite, Mary Poppins smiles wistfully as her parrot-head umbrella lifts her into the sky, ascending to bless the distance now between them.

On the back of your worship folder today is a poem from Jan Richardson, a blessing for the distance that I leave with you today:

It is a mystery to me  
How as the distance  
Between us grows,  
The larger this blessing  
Becomes,

As if the shape of it  
Depends on absence,  
As if it finds its form  
Not by what  
It can cling to  
But by the space that arc  
Between us

As this blessing  
Makes its way,  
First it will cease  
To measure itself



By time.

Then it will release  
How attached it has become  
To this place  
Where we have lived,  
Where we have learned  
To know one another  
In proximity and  
Presence.

Next this blessing  
Will abandon  
The patterns  
In which it moved,  
The habits that helped it  
Recognize itself,  
The familiar pathways  
It traced.

Finally this blessing  
Will touch its fingers  
To your brow,  
Your eyes,  
Your mouth;  
It will hold  
Your beloved face  
In both its hands,

And then  
It will let you go;  
It will loose you  
Into your life;  
It will leave  
Each hindering thing  
Until all that breathes  
Between us  
Is blessing  
And all that beats  
Between us  
Is grace.

Amen!