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Ascension Sunday (the 7th Sunday after Easter)
May 28, 2017
Acts 1:1-14
Psalm 47
Luke 24: 45-53

The Time to Exhale

The readings we have just heard are the texts appointed for the celebration of Christ's Ascension. If this story isn't as familiar to you as others in our scriptures, there is a reason. The ascension of Jesus is historically celebrated by the Christian church forty days after the resurrection. It *always* falls on a Thursday – which could explain why the Ascension isn't as familiar as Good Friday, Easter or the Day of Pentecost. By virtue of its placement, Ascension seems less important to the plot line of the Christian narrative. So why should we celebrate it?

The time line of the Ascension event is a clue for us to follow. After the resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples for forty days. Forty days . . . that biblical number that reminds us of the forty days and nights of the flood, the forty years of God's people wandering the desert before they come to the Promised Land, the forty days Jesus wrestles with the Tempter in the wilderness. In general, the number forty in the Bible is short-hand for a preparatory season that leads to a new revelation of the relationship between God and God's people. In particular, the forty days of Jesus' appearances after the resurrection prepare the disciples –and us –for a new relationship with God. Through the Spirit of Christ who – in the words of the Apostles' Creed “ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of God,” Jesus will no longer live as God incarnated in this world, both human and divine. The Holy Spirit coming on the Day of Pentecost will incarnate the divine presence of God in the disciples so they will be

witnesses of Jesus' love. This call belongs to each person and community that seeks to walk the way of Jesus thereafter.

Ascension marks the end of the confusing time the disciples spend with Jesus after his Resurrection – and invites the pause before something new.

In her book, *The Irrational Season*, Madeline L'Engle writes : “*He broke the powers of death and returned briefly to quite a few people – not everybody, but enough so that his presence was noted – though he was never recognized on sight. Then, after a time he ascended, whatever that means.*”

“*Whatever that means . . .*” We aren't the first to be puzzled by the Ascension, and we aren't the first to try and figure it out. On the front of the bulletin is a photograph of a gilded ceiling boss at York Minster in England. Part of the original cathedral ceiling, it was destroyed during a fire. The one you are looking at was recreated in 1840 from a drawing of the original. The faces of the disciples look up as Jesus' feet disappear from view – a literal depiction of Luke's telling “as they were watching him, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

21st century disciples may smile at this literal depiction of the Ascension – we know enough about the physics of the universe to understand the image of Jesus floating up to Heaven makes no literal sense. But what then are we to make of it?

The Thursday Morning Women's Study group – whom I personally refer to as the “Wise Women” - has been reading together the book by L'Engle that I quoted a few paragraphs ago. In it, she explores the liturgical seasons

and celebrations of the Christian year, in prose and poetry. We have just finished the chapter on the Ascension and knowing I was to preach on this topic, they gently suggested that I spend a bit more time on L'Engle's poetry of the Ascension. I took their advice – after all, I call them “the Wise Women” for a reason. I re-read the chapter L'Engle entitles “*The Blue Balloon*.” In it, she tells the story of a blue balloon that her daughter acquired on a family trip to the zoo. As often happens to young children with helium balloons, the little girl lets go, and in the midst of cries of loss and grief as the family watches the balloon ascend, L'Engle finds the metaphor for understanding the Ascension:

*We wiped the eyes, blew the little nose, consoled the tears,
did not, of course, offer a new balloon, instead were silly and
waggled our ears,
turned sobs to laughter, accepted loss and hurried
home for dinner. This day is not like that day, and yet they
must have tarried,
looking up at the sky, looking up into the sky the day he left
them, full of loss and tears.*

*He had come back to them, was with them and then was lost again,
or so it seemed, the table left without the host.*

*The disciples did not understand all that he had said,
that comfort would be sent, there would be wine and bread.
Lost and abandoned (where is my blue balloon?) they did not
comprehend until the Day of Pentecost.*

Even after he told them, his followers did not hear and see:

“What is this he saith unto us? A little while and ye

*Shall not see me, and again a little while, and ye shall . . . when?
Tomorrow?*

*“We do not understand.” Lord, nor do I, and I share in their
sorrow*

*at the same time the Spirit sets my sorrow free
to turn to love, and teaches me through pain to know
that love will dwell in me and I in love only if I let go.*

The Ascension according to L’Engle is about letting go – for the disciples and for us. It is an exhalation of sorrow and pain at the loss of all that was. She speaks hauntingly of the hope resurrection brought to his disciples – that Jesus would continue to teach them, lead them, feed them both body and soul. And just when they figure out who this resurrected Jesus is and are rejoicing, he leaves them-again. And they have no choice but to exhale and let him go. They must wait until the Spirit descends; they must hold their collective breath and cling to the hope that Jesus will “send what God has promised.”

Perhaps this is the reason for the time between Ascension and the Day of Pentecost. Both passages of today’s Scriptures tell us that after Jesus leaves them, the disciples return to Jerusalem to wait for the Spirit promised to them. In that space, the disciples are invited to exhale into what educators call a period of “critical reflection.” The disciples re-visit what they know through the lenses of their Scriptures, their traditions, their experiences and what their reason reveals about these things. I suspect they spent this time discussing, grieving, praying and reflecting on their time with Jesus, re-thinking their assumptions in light of all that had happened, and wondering what that implies for what happens next.

By the way, we Methodists call this the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, but this rhythm of reflection is an old and ancient one.

As I prayed and reflected on L'Engle's poem, it came to me that our world, our country, our denomination and our own faith community are in the same place as the disciples looking up toward Jesus' disappearing feet -so very much has changed, and we do not understand. We live in a time that challenges all of our communal stories. The abundance of our planet has been squandered and we live in fear of scarcity. The country of the self-sacrifices made by the Veteran's we honor this weekend no longer appears to value our responsibility to our most vulnerable citizens. In our denomination, the "sexuality" question other Christian denominations have already answered threatens to tear us apart. And in our own faith community, we are deeply grieved not only by the deaths of so many beloved siblings in Christ, but by the changes of demographics, commitments and priorities influencing our budget. Just like the disciples, we have gathered intentionally to discern together where God is working in us and our church. We have come together to mourn and to celebrate those we love. We continue to study the Bible and live out faithful responses to the issues that face us as Christians and citizens. We have been holding our breath for awhile now.

The days between Ascension and the Day of Pentecost remind us that such periods of reflection are necessary in the life of any community of faith. We need the intentional space to deeply exhale in order to make room for what comes next. Our next deep inhalation on the Day of Pentecost will blow us into a new and tumultuous life in the Spirit for the sake of the world. L'Engle describes it this way:

*My bones are turned to ice.
I am not here . . . nor there
but caught in this great breath.
Its rhythm cracks my ribs.
Blown out I am expelled.
Breathed in I am inspired*

*The wind blows where it will
across the water's face.
The flowing sea of sky
Moves to the wind's demand*

*The stars stretch fiery tongues
Until this mortal frame
is seared to bone and ash
and yet, new born it lives.*

*Joy blazes through the night:
Wind, water, fire are light.*

The day of Pentecost cannot come until the disciples exhale and reflect at Ascension. And just like the first disciples, we too, we need time to deeply exhale to prepare for the Spirit's arrival. I invite you to take some time this week to rest in the exhalation. What's coming next will take our breath away -and fill us with the very breath of the Holy Spirit. And who knows where She will take us next?