

This reading is from the last passage in the gospel of Luke, Jesus saying Goodbye to his disciples:

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.

6/5/11 Ascension – and Graduate Sunday. Sermon by Susi Kawolics

Sometimes the timing is right, and it happens that the lectionary reading fits in really well with our secular celebrations. Today we commemorate the feast of the Ascension in our liturgical cycle at the same time that most schools are holding graduation ceremonies for their Seniors. In our scripture reading, Jesus is saying his Goodbye to the disciples for the last time, and telling them to go back to the city and wait until they are clothed with power. This passage ties in what many of our students are experiencing. They are saying Goodbye to their schools – both High Schools and colleges, and unless they have definite jobs lined up, or are starting summer school, most of them are entering this same kind of time as the disciples did – that in-between time of waiting. They have left one kind of life behind, and are anticipating the start of something new. Many have an idea of what that new leg of the journey might look like, but just like the disciples, they are not sure exactly what to expect, and will spend some time waiting to find out.

My guess is that there are graduating students here today, and possibly even some parents, who can identify with the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' leaving, to the end of their relationship with him as they have known it. These students and parents enter this period of saying Goodbye and letting go with glad souls, rejoicing as Jesus' followers did after they had seen Jesus leave. I personally know at least one such student, for whom this graduation and transition is a very joyous occasion. And there are probably more.

On the other hand, I also know of at least two parents, and I suspect some many others, and possibly some students as well, who would identify more with the feelings of the disciples on Easter morning than on the Ascension, which happened forty days later. On Easter, these same disciples were despondent and sad at realizing that the one they had loved was gone. In the last few weeks, we have read about those disciples and how they felt on Easter. We heard the story of two of them traveling to Emmaus, sad and despondent, even though they had been told beforehand that his death would not be the end. Good-byes and transitions of all sorts can be difficult, even when we know what is coming next, even when we know the leave-takings are not forever.

So what happened to these disciples in the forty days between Jesus' appearances to them on Easter evening, and Jesus' leave-taking on the Ascension? How did they go from dejection and sadness to hopefulness and gladness in such a relatively short period of time? On the

surface, looking at their circumstances objectively, not that much changed for them. Yes, during that period, they had had a chance to reconnect with Jesus, to see him a few more times, but it still wasn't the same as when he was with them before the crucifixion. In those forty days between the resurrection and ascension, he was only present to them a few times, and they never knew when he would show up. He also made it clear that it would not be the same as it had been before, and that he would be leaving them again shortly anyway. So it wasn't really their circumstances that changed, but rather their perspective on those circumstances. They had learned to see things in a different way after Jesus opened their minds to the meaning of the scriptures. He spent those forty days giving them a way to understand how he had come to save them, not from an oppressive regime, as they had expected, but rather from sin and death. He enabled them to realize that his mission with them was not to take over their enemies, but rather to love and transform them.

Part of what the Ascension calls us to then is seeing things from a different perspective, from a higher perspective, as it were. Too often we tend to see good-byes and endings only as endings, which leave us sad. We see only from a limited human point of view, we see only the surface. But the Ascension, the whole of Christian life calls us to look from a higher place, and to look deeper and wider. We are called to look at the events in our lives through the lens of our faith, to see the whole picture. Just as Jesus' goodbye to the disciples this day was not only an ending, but also a beginning, so it is with our goodbyes as well. With his leave-taking, Jesus would be sending the spirit to empower the disciples to fulfill their calling.

Seeing from a distance allows for wider perspective. Sometimes when we are too close to those who are our teachers, our mentors, our parents, or even our children, we fail to appreciate their attributes, their wisdom, their unique gifts and talents. The closeness can be almost smothering, and maybe even a distortion. But when there is some distance between us, when we part, we often gain a new perspective. Suddenly parents and teachers seem to get much wiser in the eyes of their children, and children appear so much more grown up and responsible to parents and teachers. Sometimes the parting allows each one to grow more fully into who they were meant to be. This happened to the disciples when they were left to carry on the mission of Jesus after he left them.

Jesus not only opened the minds of his disciples, he also promised them power from on high and gave them a final blessing. We too are often given gifts and blessings in our lives, especially by those we have close relationships with. Jesus' blessing gave his disciples joy, courage, strength and a sense of peace. Blessings are gifts we take with us when we leave one part of our lives and enter into another part.

Just as the disciples did not leave everything behind in embarking on their new journey after Jesus left them, we also do not sever our ties with our Good-byes. We carry within ourselves the blessings of our lives that we have accumulated. The root of the word blessing comes from the word "blood". It refers to the ancient use of blood in ritual acts of consecration. This is one way to understand more deeply what blessings are for us:

Artist and writer Jan Richardson puts it like this: *The blessing that Jesus gives as he goes is one that will infuse the community with his love, his grace, his lifeblood. He gives a blessing that will run in the veins of those he has called to be his body; a blessing that will beat in the hearts of those whom he is sending into the world.*

Just like those disciples, when we go from one place to another, we take with us the blessings from those parts of our lives. We embody them, tuck them away into the recesses of our hearts so that we can draw on them when we need them. They become a piece of what

makes us who we are, they make the pain of separation bearable. Part of the blessing that Jesus gives is that he will always abide with us, that he will always be in our hearts.

It is no coincidence that Jesus took the disciples to Bethany for his leave-taking and his bestowing of blessing. Although throughout his life, he had been a wanderer, with no permanent home, it was in this village that he probably felt the closest to what he would call home. This is where his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived and they had often welcomed him. He enjoyed hospitality there, meals, friendship, conversation. He had been anointed there, and had raised Lazarus from the dead. This was the last place he had visited and stayed before his crucifixion. So on the day of his Ascension, he took his disciples to the place which was home for him.

While we know that ultimately our home is with God, in this life we nevertheless long for places where we feel at home. And when we leave those places, it can be hard. Today we have graduating seniors with us – some who are leaving homes here in the area and moving elsewhere, and others those who have left the colleges where they felt at home. I hope and pray that a piece of wherever you call home will always be with you, and that you will always feel a sense of home here. I hope that this church and this community is for you what Bethany was for Jesus.

Jason and Carly I know have been part of this church their whole lives. I had the privilege of caring for them in the nursery when I was your nursery attendant here. They, as well as Johnny were confirmed here, and are members. Tyler, although not a member, is nevertheless a special part of our community. He was baptized here, and we enjoy having him come with his parents and grandparents. I feel as if my own daughter Kiran has carried the blessings of this community with her also. When I was pregnant with her, I was working as your nursery attendant, and you came together as a community and showered me, and her, with gifts and blessings.

So now I would ask that the graduates who are here come forward. Please give us your name, what school you've graduated from, and what, if any, your plans are for the future. Then remain standing.

Just as Jesus gave a blessing to his disciples that they could carry with them, I would like to give a blessing to you on behalf of this community. I invite those in the congregation to raise their hands toward the graduates as well. This place is a home for you, a place where you are surrounded by those who love you and wish you well. Take this blessing into your hearts from this church community as you go into the future.

Let us pray:

Alpha and Omega God –

We ask that you bless our graduates in all their endings and their beginnings.

Let them not be troubled about the past nor anxious about the future, but live fully in each moment.

As they step forward into the world that awaits, may they carry with them all the blessings they have gathered from the people and places that have shaped their lives, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future.

May they always be aware of your abiding presence with them on every road they travel. Guide their feet on your paths, open their minds to your wisdom, fill their hearts with your compassion. May they courageously go where your spirit leads, live fully the life you have granted them, and become all that you created them to be.

We ask this blessing upon them, in the name of Jesus, our risen Savior. – Amen.

As we prepare for Communion, we remember that Jesus left this sacrament for his followers on the last night of his life. He blessed them with nourishment for the physical journey, with a way to remember his sacrifice and his love. As we share in this bread and cup, may we receive the blessing of this love and forgiveness, and carry it in our hearts wherever our life journeys take us. Amen.