

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
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The disciples look up, their eyes are to the empty space above them. They ask, aloud, "What has just happened?" Their mouths are open wide in disbelief. They stutter inarticulate words. Shock registers in their brains like waves crashing upon rocks as their minds scramble to comprehend this extraordinary happening. Their souls ache for more. Their hearts skip a beat, and some instinctively fall to the ground on their knees, as happens to us when we realize that something life-changing has just occurred, no matter where we find ourselves: in a doctor's office, at a graduation service, in a hospice center, or as we walk the trail at Fuller Lake and suddenly realize we have entered into a whole new world.

I imagine some of the disciples, at least impulsive Peter, jumped and stretched their arms high, with all their might, trying to grasp the feet of Jesus as he disappeared from their sight, for they must have realized that they have just entered a liminal time, an in-between time when they have once again lost the Jesus they knew and loved, first to death on the cross, and now to a cloud which enveloped the bodily presence of the resurrected Christ. They wanted to hold onto what was. This seems to be a natural response when change is thrust upon us. In these unsettling moments, the barrage of emotions fast charging at us are felt intensely and with opposing emotions clashing. One does not overpower the other, but rather they fit together somehow. These liminal moments, during which we experience and feel the absence or presence of God, that which we talk of in these life-changing moments, seem to catapult us into a space where we may simultaneously experience bewilderment and peace, joy and sorrow, confusion and clarity, betrayal and intense love, hope and despair. This disorientation often leads to a desire to return to what was, a simpler time, a known reality. We naturally wonder how two opposing things, either emotions or ways of being, can be true at the same time: Can death really be conquered while we are alive? Can we really be constantly busy, yet accomplish nothing? Can the church or our lives be broken, and still blessed?

I have been in that place before, at some of the most dramatic and grace-filled moments of my life, such as the birth of my children, the death of my parents, looking out upon the Grand Canyon, sitting in the still of the night with our sailboat anchored at Turner's Creek, or, recently, as I sat on the porch of the Forrester family home in Gros Mangles in Haiti, understanding that something was happening, shifting within, drawing me into a new reality that bore little resemblance to what had been before.

These moments seem vulnerable, tenuous, and fragile, and seem so different to the weight they present to us in our lives' narratives. These are the moments when I often feel that life is precious and beautiful and as easily broken as the carefully constructed spider's web, delicately crafted, intricately and purposefully designed, which holds droplets of morning dew as it rests between two branches in a tree budding forth its leaves.

Life for the disciples, when Jesus ascended into heaven, was vulnerable, tenuous, and fragile. They could only gaze at what was for they could not grasp what was yet to come. Jesus tells them they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and, then, to go and be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, told the story of Jesus' baptism in his gospel account as a communal event, witnessed and experienced by many, so they knew. The disciples had seen the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus at his baptism, and now this marvelous encounter with the divine would happen to them, and somehow, they would be empowered to go to the ends of the earth and bear witness to the truth of Jesus' resurrection. But all they knew in the moment was the absence of what had been.

I used to think that when we feel the absence of life as it had been, or when the world we know comes tumbling down, or when we were enveloped by a cloud of disorientation or disbelief, God then showed up and responded by ushering us into a new life, by meeting us in that place of deconstruction, of chaos and disorder, in order to reconstruct or re-order our lives into something more whole and true. I still do believe God meets us in the place of letting go of what we knew before, but I have come to understand that God is also the force that pulls at the seam of the reality we have constructed in order to keep us on that ever-moving path of renewed life, which is one way to witness to Jesus' resurrection.

In our story from Acts today, we recognize that it was the force of God that pulled Jesus into heaven. The disciples perceived Jesus' absence as one of separation and loss, and this was the source of their disorientation. God caused this disorientation so that the mission of God, enacted by the person of Jesus, could be transferred and claimed by the disciples, which became their re-orientation of their new lives and witness. If Jesus hadn't left the disciples, they would never have grown into the fullness they could; they could never have claimed the mission as their own; they would always have been looking for Jesus to do it all, and do it for them, or on their behalf. God's plan did not allow for that, and Jesus exits the scene only after he transfers his mission to them, empowered through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells them to go to places they've never been, to encounter unknown people and cultures, and to bear witness to the truth of Jesus in ways they've never before imagined. This couldn't have happened if Jesus had stayed. God was the force behind the deconstruction (what felt like the absence of Jesus to the disciples) and the reconstruction (which felt like the presence of Jesus

through the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the living out of Jesus' mission). God is in it all, the parts that feel torn apart and the parts that are put back together, never to leave us abandoned, nor orphaned, but empowered with the Holy Spirit, that leads us into a mature faith.

This example calls us to wonder what we need to let go of in order for us to grow into ourselves, into Christ's mission, in a fuller or deeper way. We may ask ourselves, "Who are we relying on to bear witness to Jesus on our behalf, rather than claiming that as our own personal mission?" Perhaps we need to ponder, "What do we need to shift? What does God need to break open or break down? What absence do we need to feel, in order to change the world as the Spirit empowered us to do in our baptism?" Each time we do let go, each time we experience disorientation or disorder in our lives, or the absence of something or someone we loved dearly, we are told that the Holy Spirit will meet us there. Each time we let go and "let God", we are told that we will receive the gift of insight and clarity, hope and joy, and will be made stronger to claim the mission Jesus left with his disciples, and with us: "Go and bear witness to my name!"

These times when we let go may make us feel vulnerable, tenuous, and fragile, as though we are holding onto life with nothing stronger than a wisp of a baby's hair or the filament of a spider's web, and yet this is real living. This is the abundant life Jesus wishes for us. In this liminal space, we move from living on the sidelines, from staying in the lane, from hunkering down on safe ground, to something that is real, challenging, infused with the Holy Spirit, and bearing witness to Christ's resurrection.

One can look at the ascension of Jesus as a tremendous act of faith in us, because Jesus, in leaving us, tells us we are ready to become the body of Christ, the Church here on earth. It's a huge responsibility and we quite naturally and sometimes feel as though we are not up to this task. We may wonder what we can do from the place of our brokenness or smallness of heart or closeness of mind. But Presiding Bishop Curry reassures us in his message this week that God can still work in the ruins of our lives or in our world. God can still, through us and with the power of the Holy Spirit, move us and our world, from our nightmare to God's dream. For you see, a life lived in the Holy Spirit has a buoyancy to it. We become lifted up, ascended above the chaos and the challenges, when we pray. And it is prayer that fills the cracks, creates something new, and propels us forward to bear witness to the truth of Jesus' resurrection, which is what Jesus asks of us. We need to pray so we know the truth that we are carrying forward into the world.

For Christians, as those bearing Jesus' name, our first and most fundamental call is to witness as

followers of Jesus. One way we do this is remembering him, much like we remember on Memorial Day those who gave their lives in defense of our nation. In the Eucharist, we tell Jesus' story and make him present today. But this, like every aspect of worship, is not only spiritual nurturing for us, but also practice for the sake of the world.

What memorial to Jesus can we celebrate and make beyond the walls of the church, in our lives, in our work and play and relationships? How can we bear witness about him and for his sake, to see the world with his eyes and heart, as it is and as it is becoming, by our thoughts, words, and deeds?

There are so many ways! We each hold distinct possibilities, yet nonetheless, we are each of us called to witness to Christ. May we remember first and foremost that Jesus blessed people and blessed the world.

So, witness to Jesus means that we too are to bless people and our world. That's what it means as a Christian to bear the name of Jesus: to be a witness to his resurrection. We are to bless. It's really as simple as that. In each of our acts, thoughts, or expressions, we are to bless each other, to build up community, to bring holiness into our midst. Some will do that by healing, others by teaching, some by challenging the status quo, but we all do it with love, for it was Jesus' love which blessed and sanctified this world. This is what the disciples did when they finally stopped gazing toward what was. They gathered as a community, remembered Jesus, broke bread together, imagined together, and prayed together. And then they went from gazing to going – off into the world as bearers of the good news. May we do that today as well. Amen.