

When Jesus Left
Luke 24.44-53
May 8, 2016
Easter 7C/Ascension Sunday
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

My grandfather had a tank with two fish he named Yin and Yang. He spent a considerable amount of time in East Asia during his career in the Air Force and developed an interest in Chinese culture that I would love to better understand had he lived into my adulthood. Lingering questions aside, I recall him setting up that tank, naming those fish, and explaining to me the light and dark of yin and yang; interconnected forces in Chinese philosophy.

I'm thinking of those fish this morning as we return to Luke for an Ascension scene before next week's Pentecost celebration; two stories best understood in connection to one another. Luke often writes in pairs for the purpose of one story making sense only when held against the next. In today's text, Jesus finds the disciples in Jerusalem, but he leads them to Bethany. He leaves them but promises them Power is coming to them. There is movement between Ascension Sunday and Pentecost. There's a point to the journey from Jerusalem to Bethany. There's a necessary interconnectedness in these texts that tells us something about our lives.

In the first six weeks of Easter, we read from John's Gospel of Jesus' multiple appearances to friends and followers in his newly resurrected form. The reality of his post-resurrection existence is washing over everyone until the stories finally end and we are assured, "there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

Not Luke. In this last passage of Luke, everything moves fast—Jesus is not at the tomb when the friends go to look for him, Jesus hiddenly appears to them as they walk to Emmaus, breaks bread and vanishes, returns next in Jerusalem to show his wounds, and then eats fish with them. Luke hits the high points and swiftly takes us to our text for today of this very last scene with Jesus leading and teaching the disciples again. He opens their minds fully to the scriptures. Commissions them as practitioners of the Way. Leads them out to the edge of town (where his best work always happens), blesses them as leaders, and slips away.

Unlike 40 days of teaching and time together, Luke contains all of the action between Resurrection and Ascension in just one day. By the end of their time with Jesus (again, hard to recognize at first, not a ghost, can vanish in front of them but also eat with them), they have left Jerusalem for Emmaus (to the west) and then hurried back to Jerusalem when upon realizing they have encountered the Christ. It is there that he boldly meets them again, now fully recognized as a risen Lord still bearing the wounds of his execution. And in six verses he gives them final instructions—opening their minds so that they fully comprehend what he is saying—all the while promising them a Holy Power that will come to them in Jerusalem yet guiding them away from Jerusalem.

Their journey to the east is a journey of blessing. He takes them all to Bethany to commission them as representatives of his Way. And as they pray and wait for a Divine Power that will surely come, it is in that place that he withdraws from them to return to God. What has happened here? Why the walking and talking? Why not eat the bread and fish, bless them where they stand, and they take his leave? Why Bethany and not Jerusalem?

Matthew, Mark, and John all set the anointing of Jesus with oil in Bethany. John and Luke connect Mary, Martha, and Lazarus with Bethany. After his Palm Sunday entry on a donkey, Jesus goes away to Bethany to rest. Some also say Bethany, just two miles outside of Jerusalem, is where John the Baptizer was ministering and blessing people in the name of God. For Jesus to perpetually be on his way to Jerusalem in Luke's gospel, and in Acts to receive an instruction to stay put in Jerusalem, it is curious to me that these final verses of Luke's gospel have Jesus specifically leading the disciples out of Jerusalem as far as Bethany.

Writer Peter Woods also asks why and offers: "Bethany is the place of consolation, community and care for Jesus. The home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, was his refuge and at the same time the prototypical church community."

If Jerusalem is the city that 'stones the prophets' and which refuses to be 'gathered like chicks under the wings' of Jesus; then Bethany is the place where prophets recover and where clucking, caring community is to be found. Jesus, in taking the disciples as far as Bethany, points to where his incarnation will continue after the ascension. Yes, he does tell them to go and wait in Jerusalem for the gift from on high, but they are to go as the Bethany house community, caring for and supporting each other.

Pentecost may mark the birth of the empowered church, but the Ascension marks the gathering of that grieving, wounded and wondering group preparing, through pain, for inspiration.

Here in Bethany, where Lazarus walked out of a tomb that had been sealed for four days, these women and men are experiencing the very human realities of separation, loneliness and angst that we know from our own experience are the portals through which Spirit can blow.”¹

Before he leaves them bodily forever, he takes them to the place where he found his comfort, where he was most fully himself, where he was blessed and found rest and friendship and laughter. Where he argued and wept with beloved friends. Where he broke bread and had his feet washed. The church may be born into Jerusalem next week, but it is conceived here in Bethany among this loyal group of friends.

Biblical scholars refer to this passage as “The Commissioning” because of the blessing Jesus speaks over them with his arms raised and the mind-opening teaching of scripture they receive. It is not insignificant that Jesus commissions them in this particular place, away from Jerusalem. Bethany is the gathering place, the resting place. As my friend Sarah likes to say, “You can let all your fat parts hang out there.” No pretending or trying happens in this community. This is where the gathered men and women can tell the truth about their lives and know they will be received, loved, welcomed, and blessed just exactly as they are. They need to be rooted in that kind of community before they can go back to Jerusalem and beyond.

Once they understand their rootedness, then “power from on high” will come. That’s what Luke describes instead of a gifting of the Holy Spirit. Luke is describing the power to come from the presence of the Spirit among them. Fred Craddock writes, “For Luke, the Spirit empowers the church for its mission in the world...the Holy Spirit has moved the church into areas in which it otherwise would not have gone and into activities in which it otherwise would not have engaged. Power disturbs, and yet it is not usually until afterward in reflection that we relate disturbances to the Holy Spirit.”²

We anticipate and welcome the Holy Spirit as comfort, but how as a power of disturbance. Barbara Lundblad also encourages us to consider this coming Power in the stories of Christ, “Look at Jesus and we will see where the Spirit has been: Jesus’ feet carried him where others wouldn’t go, brought him to tables surrounded by odd

¹ <https://thelisteninghermit.com/2012/05/16/ballast-from-bethany-ascensionb/>

² Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p. 292

companions, gathered children on his lap, and questioned the disparities between the wealthy and the poor.”³

The power from on high that is surely coming to followers of Jesus will draw them out to places wilder than Jerusalem. If we open ourselves up today to this Holy Power, we too will be carried out to wild and disturbing. All the more reason for the following communities to know the places that center them. Like the early disciples, we move out from that center to places unknown, then we return for rest and comfort. We move out again to wherever that Holy Power leads, and slip away again to the place of laughter and restoration. As the disciples comprehend all of this and receive Jesus’ blessing, he takes his leave and is carried to the heart of God.

The more popular Ascension text is found in Acts 1 in which Jesus is lifted into the clouds while the watchers are reminded by angelic men to not stand around waiting for Jesus to appear again. And so, the disciples return to Jerusalem for life and ministry together. The Acts telling is a much grander exit but with the same result for the community: the emphasis isn’t on Jesus’ exit or where he’s going or how he gets there. The emphasis is on the disciples response: back to prayer, back to worship, back to community, back to living out the Way. The Way of Jesus is not a way of waiting. The Way of Jesus is for life, for action, for worship and friendship and ministry and abundance right now. The story for us today in these Ascension tales is that we aren’t biding our time for God to do something someday somewhere else through some other people and place and time. Everything we need is already here. This is about waking up and accepting the power of God’s breath and wind and spirit moving right here.

I believe we made a mistake along our way, and we set out to institutionalize Bethany. We understood Bethany’s place as a necessary site of truth-telling, prayer, comfort, celebration, and wholeness that buoyed us for life. We felt its goodness and vitality. But like every well-meaning person of scripture who tried to build an altar or a monument or a tent to make that moment last forever, we built institutions and buildings to harness Bethany. We trained and paid clergy to maintain Bethany and keep it warm for us whenever we want to come visit for a while. We waited for the wild movement of the spirit and the challenges of ministry to come to us here. We got comfortable and didn’t want to go out to Jerusalem anymore. We forgot that Bethany was the home base and starting point, but not the whole calling. Maybe this year we can understand how Pentecost doesn’t make sense without this Commissioning-Ascension Sunday.

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2850

Gathering here is a starting point for the wild movement of God's Spirit as we give ourselves to the Way of Jesus.

We gather in here, then we move back into our lives. We gather in here, then we move out to serve (like we will next Saturday, May 14, all across Greater New Orleans).

There's a rhythm. Sometimes we're in Jerusalem, sometimes we're in Bethany. We need the movement back and forth to the place of advocacy and activism and the place of rest, the place of public service and the place of honest community gathered around the table. Bethany happens here, Bethany happens around your own tables, Bethany is the place where we find our center, remember Jesus' blessing, orient ourselves in our callings, name God's presence in our midst, and then that wild and powerful Spirit draws us out again to places we can only begin to imagine.