

When He's Gone
Acts 1.6-14
Ascension Sunday
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Do you remember the Stanford Marshmallow Study? Researchers at Stanford University spent more than a decade studying delayed gratification by inviting children from the campus preschool into an undecorated room and placing a marshmallow on the table before them. The young children were told they could either eat one marshmallow now or sit and wait and then have two marshmallows. But if they ate the first marshmallow during the waiting time, then they would not receive a second. The adult then left the room for 15 minutes while researchers watched through a one-way window. One researcher noted some children would "cover their eyes with their hands or turn around so that they couldn't see the tray, others started kicking the desk, or tugged on their pigtails, or stroked the marshmallow as if it were a tiny stuffed animal," while others would simply eat the marshmallow as soon as the researchers left.¹ The long-range study tracked these children for decades into their adult lives, and how they waited as preschoolers was determined to be a predictor in later life of everything from test scores to body mass index to navigating middle-aged boredom. If 4, 5, and 6-year olds could wait 15 minutes—alone, in a room with no toys—to eat two marshmallows instead of one, then a series of big and small life choices would work to their safety, wellness, and overall life opportunities for decades to come.

I thought of this test as I reflected on the disciples who watched Jesus disappear into the clouds. Some of us develop wandering minds at this point in the New Testament. The birth, life, and death of Jesus capture our imaginations and inspire our living, but resurrection and ascension are a little wild. More than mystery, they sound a lot like mythology and are harder to grab hold of and incorporate into ordinary life. We Baptists aren't big fans of creeds, but most of us are at least vaguely familiar with the affirmation of the Apostle's Creed, "he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty." I'll be completely honest with you. To read this text and land on that one sentence as a conclusion just doesn't interest me. And I even think the ascension and sitting in heaven with God is altogether missing the point of what Luke is telling us in Acts 1.

¹ Mischel, Walter; Ebbesen, Ebbe B.; Raskoff Zeiss, Antonette (1972). "Cognitive and attentional mechanisms in delay of gratification." . *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

I have long loved the Acts 1 telling of Christ's ascension not because he went into the clouds to sit at the right hand of the Father. I have long loved this telling of Christ's ascension because it's about what happens to the people who loved him and followed him once that cloud rolled in and removed him from their sight. I love the stunned disciples who don't know what step to take without him leading the way. I love their gaping mouths and racing hearts. I love that they are just like me and are not convinced they can pull this life of faith off without a whole lot of help, and their greatest source of help just vanished. I love the men in white robes who sneak up beside them and ask, "What are you looking for? He's long gone now. What will you do about it?"

Unlike the Stanford Marshmallow Study, the ascension story isn't about the development and life benefits of delayed gratification. But it is about the significance of how disciples of Christ embrace the waiting space of life without Jesus. The ways in which they wait will determine everything for decades and centuries and even millennia to come. There was a protection in having Jesus close by for the faith-expanding lessons he was showing, telling, inviting them to experience. His followers could be in close proximity to brilliant teaching, unbelievable healing, and culture-shattering exchanges. But for those years together, they didn't have to be the ones leading the shattering or solely doing the healing or attempting the teaching. He would send them out from time to time to practice together, but they always gathered at the end of the day to break bread and pass the wine and talk through what they were discovering together. The disciples would miss a point or forget a teaching, and Jesus would elaborate, remind them, come at truth from a different angle. As long as Jesus was with them, they could take a pass or excuse themselves as students. But without him, the stakes are higher. Maybe too high.

Imagine that 4-year-old in pigtails with a beautiful marshmallow sitting right in front of her. We just bought two packs for making s'mores, and the marshmallows are the size of a graham cracker. Imagine one of those sitting just inches away from her little face, and seconds ago someone told her that she can have two of them if she can sit and wait a while. Do you know how long and abstract 15 minutes is to a 4-year-old? Have you spent time in a car on a road trip with a 4-year-old asking, "Is it time? Are we there now? Is this it? Are we there yet? Can we get out now? All done. I get out. I do it myself." Waiting is a skill we cultivate throughout our lives, and often at 40 and 60 and 80, we are still not great at uncertain waiting—the kind that demands we cultivate a practice of being content in the present moment.

Now imagine the men and women who wanted so badly to cling to Jesus even though he told them they couldn't. They are now standing together in pregnant silence yet

feeling utterly alone. Jesus had warned them that they would be the ones to take on his Way and carry it throughout the world. In fact, he commanded them to love so peculiarly and so distinctly that they would be known by everyone because of the love they lived out. This love would guide them to push against the empire. This Way would expand people's understandings of who God is and how God moves and what it means to love God with you heart and soul and mind. He had already shown them that sticking to the plan was very likely to end in violent death as they pushed against power. But he had also promised them that they wouldn't do this alone. Even in his absence, the Holy Spirit would hiddenly be with them to guide, strengthen, and empower them. And surely all of that is swirling through their minds as they stare at the empty sky until two men appear and gently draw them back to the present moment. And in the present moment the men and women take a deep breath and move with instinct as they gather together in an upper room waiting place to pray and plan together. How does the Jesus Way move forward without Jesus himself leading others onto the Way? What will they do in that waiting place? How will they wait together? That sat in prayer with these questions.

I love the ascension story not for the magical disappearance and the promise of a one-day return. I love this story for its call to breath and presence, seekers and followers waiting together in prayer and planning, and Jesus' total belief in these people he left to love in his name. Maybe they were staring at each other in fear or disbelief, stunned silence or awkward strategizing. However they first moved and interacted without him, he left in total confidence that they could do this Way, and Truth, and Life together, without him. And he believed completely in their capacity to move forward together, loving the world in his name. He believed in them. Now what will they do when he's gone? What will we do? How will we wait? We have inherited these stories, we spend considerable time in here retelling and making sense of these stories. What will we do with them? How will we wait?

One of my favorite rabbis says to the congregations he serves, "I can't be Jewish for you." I love it. Such a simple line that says everything about the call of faith. Watching the rabbi, listening to the rabbi, sitting near the rabbi as he eats and breathes and sings and expounds—these are not the things that makes one Jewish. Think of it like this. I have been to many a yoga class that begins and ends with a little chanting or guided meditation from various traditions. Sitting in the room, hearing the words spoken, listening to a harmonium being played or bells being chimed, feeling the peace and calm that comes from such a practice—those experiences have brought me peace but never made me Buddhist or Hindu or Hari Krishna, depending on the instructor's particular teaching. I have been to Friday prayers with Muslim neighbors and sat in the side room with women in children. I covered my head and knelt beside

sisters I did not know. I listened to the words of the Imam and the call to prayer. After the prayers, I broke bread with the faith community and listened to their stories. I felt solidarity and friendship, affection and respect. But gathering with them to pray and learn did not make me Muslim. Last week, I sat in the stunning sanctuary of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, admiring the striking beauty of that space. Surely frequent school assemblies in sacred space in this particularly town make me just a little bit Catholic, right? I can dip my fingers in the water and sit near the remarkable statues of Jesus and the saints. Is physical proximity a factor in faith formation?

Being near Jesus is not what made them his followers. Living and moving and having their being in his way is what made them his followers. Sitting alongside these stories will not make us followers of Christ. Living them in the small and big moments of our days will. The ways in which we wait, the stuff of our lives, the words and actions and practices we take on with all of who we are; all of that determines what is forming us. We sit here this morning on the Ascension bridge between Easter and Pentecost. Our pronouncement, "Christ is risen indeed, hallelujah," becomes, "Christ is risen into heaven, what next?" And we wait a bit longer for the brilliant, fiery reminder of Pentecost that we are not alone, we have never been alone, we will never be alone. God is present as Spirit and breath. That Spirit guides, emboldens, and inspires us. How do we wait? Do we continue to stare into the empty sky and hope for Jesus to come back and do faith for us? Do we walk to the praying place together and prepare ourselves for whatever might come our way tomorrow?

Some of the Jesus' followers did not want to wait even before Jesus crucifixion. They wanted him to become a warrior and lead a revolution that involved bodies and governments and political coups. Even here at another end, this one even more mystical, people are asking if there will be a revolution of power and aggression and taking us back to the good old days. To this repeating call for literal revolution, Dr. John Holbert observes, "Jesus has just made it crystal clear that the restoration of Israel under the magic power of a returning and furious warrior Jesus is not on offer. He will come back, they say, in the same way that he went, but heaven-gazing with increasingly aching necks is not the work of a true disciple of Jesus. Real disciples head for the places of Holy Spirit power, a power that will make them witnesses, proclaimers of the evangel of Jesus the Christ, the one who has come to release captives, to pay special attention to the disabled and all marginalized of the society, to see the places where oppression is rampant and speak against it; in short, to proclaim the gospel to the poor, a gospel that includes the announcement of God's good favor to all..."

Ascension Sunday is about the dangers of looking high when Jesus asks us to look low at the people he has come to redeem, to look for the poor and suffering ones rather

than to dream of earthly power and glory. In short, Ascension Sunday is a fabulous statement of the gospel."²

How do we live out this thing of faith in the waiting space that is our life together? We follow not just the steps of Jesus but also the steps of the men and women who left that day to gather in prayer. They prayed and waited together. They discerned who had skills and gifts for the various tasks they would take on. And next week we will celebrate the whirring power of the Holy Spirit that guided them to live fully in this world, not staring off into heaven and wondering what will come later, but looking low, as Holbert says, toward the same work Jesus took on—healing the sick, reaching out to those ignored by society, speaking up for what is right even if the consequences are dire. Loving so well that everyone knew they were his. If we are giving our lives to the Way of Christ Jesus, then this is what we do together when he's gone.

May it be so.

Amen.

² <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/A-Long-Look-at-Heaven-John-Holbert-05-23-2014>