

## Homily for the Sunday after the Ascension May 28, 2017

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Acts 1:6–14

1 Peter 4:12–14, 5:6–11

John 17:1–11

### In the Name of the Ascended Lord.

Today is the Sunday after the Ascension. Ascension Day was last Thursday, May 25, 40 days after Easter. Ascension Day used to be an important holy day, but now we barely recognize it and only in passing—the Sunday after.

That's why I'm going to focus on the reading from Acts rather than the Gospel as it tells the story of the Ascension. The Acts of the Apostles was written by the same author who wrote the third Gospel. Early church tradition (c 2<sup>nd</sup> century) attributes this anonymous work to Luke who accompanied Paul on one of Paul's missionary journeys.

I just love reading Luke (Gospel and Acts) because he is such a consummate storyteller. He writes tight, vivid, even dramatic scenes that really bring the subject to life. Today this evangelist could be writing screen plays for the movies or for TV.

With this morning's reading from Acts, in just 9 short verses he gives us a compelling, if bittersweet, picture of Jesus' last moments with his disciples.

Apart from the perhaps bizarre image of Jesus being lifted up into a cloud, this is a very human *goodbye moment*. It's not a farewell, but it's an "I'll-see-you-again" moment. The kind of moment we all have probably experienced.

I remember at least two such goodbyes when I was a boy and I am amazed at how closely both of them follow the framework of the scene Luke paints. To me this just shows how in touch he was with the human experience and how well he could write it.

I was about 9 years old and going away to a stay-over-camp for a WHOLE MONTH!. My first time away from home! The two hour drive there seemed to take forever. My foot locker, with a month's worth of clothes —and the only connection to my previous life, was tucked in the back of our station wagon. Boy was I anxious—I didn't know what to expect, I didn't know anyone except for Mark from my neighborhood but I didn't see him until I got there.

Finally we arrived! We drove past the entrance sign which read "Camp Sloane" (I swear it said under the name—"Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here" but in reality it just said "A YMCA Camp for Boys and Girls"), then up the long dirt road (in those day's it was oiled to keep the dust down). We checked in at the main lodge and were directed to my section to meet my section head and meet my counselor. I kept asking mom and dad, *what was it going to be like, what would I be doing, was I going to be homesick, will I make friends*—you know all those questions an anxious 9-year old would ask. *Don't worry, they said, You'll see you'll be fine, you'll love it*, they reassured me. They well knew me.

We stopped in front of my assigned section, "Pioneers," and walked to my tent, it was one of those semi-permanent canvas army tents on a platform with a supporting wood frame

work. It was roomy enough for two sets of canvas-on-frame bunk beds for four campers each, a narrow open sided wardrobe with cubbyholes for our gear, and our footlockers. And, yikes, all the flaps were rolled up—I thought it was going to be like sleeping out doors . . . with mosquitoes, and spiders, and bugs, oh my!

The counselor helped us get the footlocker out of the car and into to the tent.

Mom and dad thought it better to leave right away rather than hang around to get me unpacked and make my bunk. . . . A kiss, a hug, and there I stood looking after them as they drove away. I don't remember crying but I do remember feeling awkwardly frozen. I don't know if mom or dad cried.

Then a hand on my shoulder, my counselor welcoming me to camp saying *don't worry, you'll see them again before you know it; let's go meet your tent mates*. Before long we were unpacking, telling each other about ourselves, playing tether-ball and catch, learning about the new routine, having dinner in the dining hall (at long tables, elbow to elbow, butt to butt—a new experience for me) then evening activities at the campfire, taps, and bed! My new life started. And I wasn't alone.

Do you remember something similar in your life? Leaving home and parents for the first time—perhaps for summer camp, girl scout or boy scout camp, boarding school, college, boot camp? Is this pattern familiar to you? Do you remember how you felt? Were you the kid or were you the parent?

If you did go through this rite of passage, maybe you can connect with the emotion the disciples may have felt when their mentor, teacher, friend, and fellow sojourner left them. Let's compare the five points of my "goodbye" pattern and the "goodbye" pattern Luke outlines:

- 1) My anxious questions—what was it going to be like? what would I be doing? was I going to be homesick? will I make friends: The disciple's anxious questions— v6 *Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom?*
- 2) Mom and dad's reassuring answer—Don't worry. You'll see, you'll be fine, you'll love it: Jesus' reassuring answer—v7 *It is not for you to know the times and periods the Father has set. . . . You will receive the power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.*
- 3) Watching mom and dad leave —There I stood looking after them as they drove away: Watching Jesus leave—v10 *While (Jesus) was going and they were gazing up toward heaven . . . Do you think they cried? Do you think Jesus cried when he left them?*
- 4) Reassurance by my counselor— don't worry, you'll see them again before you know it: Reassurance by men in white—vv10&11 . . . *Suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said Men of Galilee why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*
- 5) Diving into my new routine—playing with my mates, swimming in the lake, arts and crafts, sports, dinners at that long table, campfires: The disciples' diving into their new routine—vv12,13,14 *They returned to Jerusalem . . . went to the room upstairs where they were staying . . . constantly devoting themselves to prayer.*

Too often, I think, when we read the Bible or listen to something read from the Bible we don't hear the human story the Bible is telling us.

Too often **I** try to analyze the subtext, parse out the subtle meaning of this word or that phrase, think about the overall structure and why it was written this way as opposed to that way. And I simply forget to look for the human face expressed in the story: the pain, the anxiety, the anger, the uncertainty, the joy, the relief, the frustration. Let's remember, everything you feel, everything I feel, in our every day lives, these people felt too.

Sitting here today we know how their stories end, we know what happened. And sometimes, that knowledge, that sense of inevitability, distances us from the fact that **they** didn't know how it would all turn out.

They didn't know what would happen next: Jesus was with them, then Jesus was killed, then Jesus was resurrected and with them again, then Jesus ascended and left them. Whew!

So, what then did they do? Well, they, as a community, committed themselves to prayer. And just like I did when I dove into my new life at camp, they dove into their new life in the work that was assigned to them "to be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

You and I may be scared or anxious or feel absolutely inadequate for the enormity of the task before us—to be Jesus' witness "to the ends of the earth." But if we continue to break bread together, pray together, give each other support, we too will become part of that community that Christians in the future will look back at us knowing how our story ends.

**Amen**