

“Leave-Taking”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Acts 1:6-14

I went to pick up the kids from school Thursday, and as I waited, dozens of car horns started blaring. At first, it confused and slightly alarmed me, because the sound of a car horn usually means danger or anger, but soon it dawned on me that these were honks of joy, as the high school seniors celebrated their escape from the cruel clutches of papers and projects and tests – at least for a while.

It occurred to me that a whole season of leave-taking has begun. Seniors graduate. Many people gear up for vacation, striking out for new horizons. More people move their residence at this time of year than any other, packing their possessions, searching for a home, embarking on the adventure of a new job or retirement, finding new friends and a new place in the world.

All of these changes are exciting, but the experience can be bittersweet. Leaving takes work, involves uncertainty, and alters relationships. Travel can be exhilarating and inspiring, but also frustrating and exhausting. Moving is laden with anxiety. Will things work out better in the new place? There’s just no way to know until you arrive, get the lay of the land, and start exploring. And for those left behind, like friends or the parents of high school seniors, there’s a whole jumble of emotions to contend with. The process of leave-taking takes hope to ward off the fear and the sense of loss, hope that greater things lay ahead.

On the fortieth day after his resurrection, Jesus left the disciples, ascending into the sky. It must have been an amazing sight, but try to imagine their inner turmoil. First, he’s alive. Then he’s dead on the cross, then alive again three days later. Then forty days after that, Whoosh! He’s gone once more.

The disciples' final conversation with Jesus included both disappointment and promise. They wanted to know "when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" And to paraphrase, Jesus bluntly told them, "None of your business," but he did give them a purpose, a mission, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem . . . and to the ends of the earth," and he promised a gift, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you," an event we call Pentecost, which we'll celebrate next weekend.

In the meantime, in that ten day interval between Ascension Day and Pentecost, they had to wait, and it couldn't have been easy, because they didn't know when or how it would happen or what it might feel like, but they must have suspected, after all they'd experienced, that the Spirit's arrival would usher in a major leave-taking, a permanent and profound departure from one way of being to another. So they went home and prayed, which was the only sensible thing to do.

Many of us think we're done with leave-taking, except for the odd trip here and there. The nest is empty, the kids long gone. This job will be our last, or we've already settled into retirement. Where we live now is where we plan to die. There's just that one big leave-taking left. But don't be so sure about that, for leave-taking is not limited to space or the ordinary milestones of life. Those events and experiences are very real and meaningful, but they serve as symbols of the much deeper leave-taking we call faith.

Faith is a primal force, an energy like none other: active, dynamic, and restless. Faith propels us, constantly, to grow and mature in wisdom. It drives us into the heart of God's sacred mystery, opens our minds to Truth, and inspires us with grateful and generous hearts that long to serve lovingly, unselfishly. Faith carries us over the chasms and mountainous obstacles of life. It stirs us up and sends us out to share the story of the Risen Christ in word and deed.

Faith moves us in a perpetual process of leave-taking from whatever holds us down to what lifts us up: from fear and complacency to courage and a godly recklessness; from self-deceiving illusions born of insecurity to a visionary imagination that perceives God's glory and love, a love that transforms and empowers us to transcend petty matters so that we can focus on what matters most.

Are you being moved by faith? Can you feel the wind of the Spirit blowing? Will you let go and leave, or stay stuck where you are? For each of us, the honest answer is both yes and no. We surge, and we settle.

After Jesus ascended, the disciples got stuck, momentarily, heads craned back, eyes straining. Two angels appeared and asked, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" So the disciples went home and took action. They prayed, together. "Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James . . . with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers." They gathered to pray, much in the same way as we do today.

It kept them moving, even while they waited, their prayers summoning the faith that carried them to Pentecost, to the promise of the Holy Spirit. That's why we're here. In a highly individualistic, atomized society, what we're doing right now is radically counter-cultural and, sadly for so many, incomprehensible, even reprehensible. But it is essential, because the connection we share with God and each other helps us jump back into the flow of faith so we can let go and take our leave and experience the joy of moving with the Spirit.

At the school last Thursday, which was Ascension Day, by the way, those blaring car horns, which went on and on and on, annoyed me, but I couldn't help admiring how those teenagers united around a simple signal that sent the message loud and clear, "We're moving on.

We feel free. We look forward to the future, even as we celebrate the present moment.” And then they drove out of the parking lot, and went home. Amen.