

Sunday, June 5, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon

Today's readings give us a poignant picture of the disciples twice having to say goodbye to Jesus. The reading from John shares the story of the night before Jesus dies, when he prays for his friends, that they might be well in his absence. You can imagine the palpable sadness in the room as they contemplate life without their teacher, their leader.

Most of us, at one time or another, have experienced the loss of someone dear to us. Those last days, when each word seems final, take on a heightened significance. The disciples know that they will lose Jesus and they are trying to prepare themselves for that. In our reading from Acts, the disciples again must say goodbye to the Risen Christ.

Jesus, after being resurrected from the dead, has spent 40 days with the disciples, reminding them of the important work that lies ahead, commissioning them, as it were, to go out and spread the good news throughout the world. I'm sure they were hoping that he was back to stay.

There was no warning that this was the day he was leaving again. The disciples are practically in the middle of a conversation with him when he is suddenly "lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight."

Unexpected changes, unalterable endings, simple transitions – these are the milestones that make up our lives. We have little control over their occurrences and often lack clarity about what has happened until we look back. We often think of loss only in terms of someone dying, however, our lives are made up of almost daily transitions that result in the loss of something, or someone we care about.

I am reminded of a beautiful sermon I heard preached a few years ago by Nan Rossiter called, "The Last Time" Nan pointed out that "It is a blessing that we humans are, for the most part, blissfully unaware when some simple task or daily ritual happens for the very last time." Each day we move through our lives saying good byes, completing tasks, finishing something from which we will move on. Child rearing is a good example of this.

We read "Good Night Moon" for the hundredth time completely unaware that it is the last. We snuggle a sleeping child on our lap until one day they are too big – or no longer want to be held. We cheer on the sports teams, unaware that by next year they will have lost interest in the sport.

Other relationships end as well. Time goes by and we realize that we haven't heard from or seen a friend who was once part of our daily life. We can recall the last time we had dinner together, but know that we were unaware that our parting was final. Colleagues and neighbors move away and are simply gone from our consciousness, sometimes with surprising speed.

For the disciples, twice they experience Jesus for the last time. The first time he bids them farewell with his prayer but the second time they have no opportunity for good byes or final words. Both times the circumstances are such that they are left gaping at the hole in their lives caused by his absence. They are left to look back for clarity. I imagine them asking. "What did he say?" "Where did he say he was going?" "What did he say we should do?"

In her book, "Praying Our Goodbyes" Joyce Rupp suggests that we must embrace and pay attention to the many forms of goodbye in our lives, all those events and experiences in which we feel a deep sense of loss. She says

“although life is difficult and always has its share of sorrows, life is also very good and deeply enriching. It holds many promises of growth and treasures of joy.”

Endings are often beginnings. Each time we experience transition in our lives, every time something changes, there is an opportunity for something new. This is God’s grace. This is the promise that we live. Rupp points out that many people lose the grace of transitions by adopting a “Why me?” or “Not me” or “Poor Me” attitude.

We can embrace change as a natural part of life or we can view it as an adversary. However, if we chose the latter, we are destined to spend our lives embattled in a struggle to keep things as they are. Change happens – that is part of life.

Sometimes we are temporarily immobilized by change – as the disciples were after witnessing Jesus’ ascension. They stand staring at the spot in the clouds where he disappeared until the angels come and tell them to snap out of it. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” The angels draw the disciple’s attention back to reality – they know that they have to move on to Jerusalem and get on with their mission.

What if the disciples had decided that the task with which Jesus had charged them was too big? What if they had said, “Why me?” or “Not me” or “Poor Me?” But they went ahead and took the message to the ends of the earth and here we are today.

I cannot think of any transition in my own life that could possibly equal the experience of those eleven disciples on that mountain that morning. I can’t think of any challenge that I have had to face that could possibly compare with watching the Lord ascend into heaven.

No explanation. No rationalization. Astounding power and mystery. God at God’s most powerful, plucking someone right from the midst of his friends and visibly drawing him up to heaven.

The disciples must have felt a tremendous sense of awe and responsibility. How could they not go out and spread the good news of what they had seen? They had to have been completely transformed – for life. I can’t imagine that after witnessing the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ that anyone was longing to go back to the fishing boats! What if they had said “Why should we take this on, I’m not going to do this.”

What about us? What do we do with the good news of God’s love in our lives? Do we proclaim it to the ends of the earth? Do we tell everyone we know about the glory of our God? Not really. We sort of keep things private. We tell ourselves (or we have been told) that most people don’t like to talk about religion so we don’t bring it up.

Actually, I find that people are hungry to talk about religion and are loaded with questions and welcome the opportunity to do a little spiritual reflection in conversation. You might be surprised at the reaction if you started talking about your faith in a social setting or on a sports field. People are interested. People want to know.

We were talking at the prayer group meeting this week about why people come to church. We settled on the idea that people come to church to be a part of a community. People come to church to share their joys and concerns with others. People come to ask questions, to seek answers, to be reminded that God is ever present and always more powerful than us. I would add that people come to church to make sense out of all the transitions in their lives.

I invite you to come to church to be reminded that no matter what happens in your world, God is there. Come to church to remember that people have been dealing with unexpected changes, losses, and endings since the beginning of time. Come to church to offer a word of support to someone else who might be hurting. Come to church because when you are part of a community, you are never alone. There is always someone who cares about you.

On Tuesday this week, at 4:00, a new group will convene at the library. Called “Comfort and Conversation” this is a joint effort between the Salisbury VNA/Hospice program and our church. We are creating an opportunity for people to come together and share their experience of loss. I hope that you will consider joining us if your life has been affected by loss. Being part of a community certainly eases the loneliness of loss. The disciples stuck together after Jesus was gone. They went back to Jerusalem, recruited a new colleague, and made a plan. They went out into the world, renewed with hope that the Kingdom of God was near.

Today, we go out into the world, with the same hope, understanding that each transition in our lives creates an opportunity to experience God’s grace. Each time we realize that we have survived a “last time” we are reminded of the human gift of resilience and of God’s creative power working in our lives.

So don’t stand looking at the hole in the sky – we have a Kingdom to build – so let’s get to it.