

May We Grow Back, Not to What Was, But to What We Can Become

Sunday, May 16, 2021 | The Sixth Sunday After Easter | Luke 24:44-53 | John 17:20-26
Knox-Metropolitan United Church | Regina, SK | Treaty 4 Territory | Cameron Fraser

Stay

A Blessing for Ascension Day (from the Rev. Jan Richardson)

<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2013/05/05/ascensioneaster-7-stay/>

I know how your mind
rushes ahead
trying to fathom
what could follow this.

What will you do,
where will you go,
how will you live?

You will want
to outrun the grief.
You will want
to keep turning toward
the horizon,
watching for what was lost
to come back,
to return to you
and never leave again.

For now
hear me when I say
all you need to do
is to still yourself
is to turn toward one another
is to stay.

Wait
and see what comes
to fill
the gaping hole
in your chest.
Wait with your hands open
to receive what could never come
except to what is empty
and hollow.

You cannot know it now,
cannot even imagine
what lies ahead,
but I tell you
the day is coming
when breath will
fill your lungs
as it never has before
and with your own ears
you will hear words
coming to you new
and startling.
You will dream dreams
and you will see the world
ablaze with blessing.

Wait for it.
Still yourself.
Stay.

In this blessing from the Rev. Jan Richardson written for Ascension Sunday

I am so intrigued by the insight
The wisdom

In the action of turning

*You will want
to keep turning toward*

*the horizon,
watching for what was lost
to come back,
to return to you
and never leave again.*

*For now
hear me when I say
all you need to do
is to still yourself
is to turn toward one another
is to stay.*

*still yourself
turn toward one another
stay.*

Not a turning towards the horizon but a turning toward one another

Relationality and interdependence

During my 20s into my early 30s

For just more than a decade

I was deeply involved in evangelical, fundamentalist, charismatic Christian community

Involved in University Campus ministry

And the life of a local congregation

Working in areas of contemporary worship and youth and young adult ministry

During that time

I remember discussing the idea of unity within Christian Community

And I remember us using the analogy

That 1000 pianos

All tuned to one piano

Would as a result

All be in tune with one another

The lesson being

That if one was truly connected

To God

Then unity would simply sort itself out.

By extension, the most important community building (and healing) work in which one could engage

Was attending to one's own personal spirituality

That image, and a desire to trouble my early adult understanding of these things, returned to me while thinking about the Scripture passages for Ascension Sunday

This day on which we attend to the narrative of Jesus

Ascending into heaven

Himmelfahrtstag – *Holy Going Up Day*

(Perhaps our German speaking viewers might be willing to join in coffee time and both correct my pronunciation and translation but also speak to the importance of this day in that culture).

The Lectionary (the list of appointed passages) was constructed

So that communities of faith would

Over cycles of 3 years

Engage with the major moments in the text

And on a weekly basis

The selections are meant to be read against each other

Hebrew Scripture, Psalm, Christian Writings, Gospel

Special Holy Days

Like the one we mark today

Divert from the cycle and offer a special set of readings

But here's the thing with Ascension Day

Ascension is the 40th day of the Season of Easter

Falling 39 days after the Feast of the Resurrection (aka Easter Sunday)

So it falls on a Thursday

But in traditions where mid-week worship is not common

It gets celebrated on the next Sunday

(Epiphany works similarly coming 12 days after Christmas)

This means that the Lectionary offers two sets of readings

One for Ascension Day itself

That was the reading from Luke

[Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

The second set is intended for communities who either do not mark Ascension Sunday or who used those readings on a Thursday service.

I thought it would be enlightening to read the two against each other

So we had the aforementioned reading from Luke

And then, after the Psalm (which came from Ascension Day's readings)

*God has gone up with shouts of triumph,
Has gone up with a fanfare of trumpets.*

We read this passage from John:

As you, [Holy One, Father, Mother, Holy Oneness], are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.

I generally read the appointed passage for upcoming weeks with an eye to select from the appointed passages, those that will be spoken in worship, and will form the foundation for sermons or reflections.

As I looked at these offerings for this week, I began to see something interesting in reading these two from Luke and John together and against one another.

An action similar to the movement in that Blessing from Jan Richardson

While Luke offers this action of upward glance in tension with looking to the horizon

The John passage mirrors that turning towards

*You will want
to outrun the grief.
You will want
to keep turning toward
the horizon,
watching for what was lost
to come back,*

*to return to you
and never leave again.*

*For now
hear me when I say
all you need to do
is to still yourself
is to turn toward one another
is to stay.*

There's this thread in literary criticism

Called Trauma Theory

Which isn't the same as the Psychological discipline of understanding how trauma operates and effects human bodies and interpersonal and communal interaction...

Literary trauma theory calls readers to pay attention

To how the experience of trauma is present or absent in texts (and by extension how we think about it and speak about it in our particular cultures)

<https://play.acast.com/s/oh-witch-please/book1-ep.5-traumawithluciam.lorenzi-phd->

The community of the Jesus movement

The women and men from Galilee

Who have come to Jerusalem

Apprenticing with and Following their Rabbi, their Teacher

Yeshua Ben Myriam who follows in the legacy of Moshe of Egypt the prophet and teacher

When the narrative comes to this moment in Luke

The community has experienced something deeply traumatic

After performing this dramatic Palm Sunday occupation of the streets of Jerusalem turning the city into a forest with their palm branches, re-enacting their stories from the prophets of old

Amidst the Passover, this celebration of freedom

The courtyard of the temple is taken over by Jesus in this epic weeklong teach-in about Jubilee and Shalom, anticipation is high, hope is palpable

Hosanna – Relief is coming.

Then their beloved one is arrested

And killed

In a horrific public spectacle

Of Roman Power

Crucifixion, with its maniacal combination of publicity and brutality wasn't just designed to take a human life

But to destroy movements of resistance

To render the victim inhuman

It is why the Rev. Dr. James Cone wrote that in North America one cannot look at the cross without looking at the lynching tree

<https://www.orbisbooks.com/the-cross-and-the-lynching-tree.html>

Indeed, Jesus' community is shattered

And scattered

We get echoes of this in the post-resurrection narratives

People hidden away in small groups out of fearful necessity

Suspicion

You can re-read doubting Thomas as a traumatized person having witnessed such an atrocity

Then the rumours start

Myriam of Magdala

She, who for Yeshua was like a tower of strength

Has seen the tomb and it is empty

Jesus stands amongst them still scarred and wounded

Is he a ghost?

They ask in their horror

Trauma Theory in Literary Criticism invites us to attend to the text thinking about what is said and unsaid here around the condition of the community

What effect does witnessing all of this have on them?

What effect does the hiding in terror have?

Because in the text itself there is not a recognition of what those early instigators of the post-Easter Jesus movement carried with them

Individually and communally

From these devastating experiences in Jerusalem

I mean of course there are reasons the text doesn't attend to this

But then communities who gather around that text

Have some work to do if we allow these text to inform our experiences

This is what Richardson's blessing so beautifully captures

It's not just that they are unwilling to trust and turn towards one another

Something's happening in their nervous systems and cells

How does a community learn to function again after something like that?

The text simply moves

One paragraph to the next

From hiding in fear

To joyfully worshipping in the temple

Which is why this question is important

Because our lived experiences

Are neither simple nor linear

This is of course a very present question – how do they move forward from something like that?

Our “something like that” of 13 months and counting of pandemic

How do we reform friendships and communal bonds after remaining apart for so long?

After very rightly, and albeit in a spirit of care and compassion, needing to view our respiratory system, our shared breath, as potentially - and for a large chunk of time when we don't know what to make of asymptomatic spread – invisibly so, potentially harmful to one another?

What does *May We Grow Back, Not to What Was, But to What We Can Become* look like on firstly a relational level?

In the narrative of the Gospel of John, Jesus prays for a community that is about to be torn apart:

As you, [Holy One, Father, Mother, Holy Oneness], are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.

Parker Palmer offers a self-acknowledging circular suggestion:

How can we move beyond the fear that destroys connection?

By reclaiming the connectedness that takes away fear.

Both are unhelpful as soundbites or prooftexts

But as points of conversation and reflection...

I mentioned earlier, the choice of a term for what we call this time of speaking in the middle of our worship service

Sermon

Reflection

[What term resonates with you, Sermon or Reflection?](#)

What I like about reflection over against sermon

Is the acknowledgement that in 15 minutes of speaking

Profoundly complex subjects cannot be adequately laid out

Capturing all the necessary nuance

But questions can be framed

That will beget a conversation – con-ver-sare

Literally, a turning towards

So might we reflect together, what habits will guide us

As we seek to claim within ourselves *the connection that takes away fear*

What resting into that which is our very cellular makeup

*Holy One, Holy Oneness,
known in the longing within our atoms for connection,
the urge within each molecule for self-expression,
the knowing within each cell of its dignity.*

<https://www.woodlakebooks.com/search/results/inventory/All-Products/Ecology/If-Darwin-Prayed>

I've begun to look at worship and community building resources that we might pick up this fall

That might offer us

Practical (as in to be practiced)

Wisdom of compassionate and curious conversation

Turning to one another

Asking each other

...where are you coming from, in this moment when we gather (what is your story)

...where does it hurt?

...what do you need?

...where do we go from here?

Again, not great as soundbites, but as seeds for conversation...

This is the final Sunday in the Season of Easter

Next week our white banners become brilliant Scarlet as we enter the season of Pentecost

Trusting that there is spiritual energy undergirding our longing for justice, wholeness, and healing.

Trusting that Spirit enlivens deep commitment

To relationality

To rigorous work to build patterns of being

To heal patterns of harm

That violate dignity and foster the fear that disconnects

*You will want
to keep turning toward
the horizon,
watching for what was lost
to come back,
to return to you
and never leave again.*

*still yourself
turn toward one another
stay.*

We long to grow back, not to what was, but to what we can become.

Thanks be to God.