

**“Left Behind”**

*The Ascension: Acts of the Apostles 1.1–11*

*The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 23 May 2004*

Life transitions are tough, some more so than others. There is a psychological instrument called the Holmes-Rahe Indicator, which measures stressful life transitions. The death of a spouse is typically the most dramatic stressor (it gets a rating of 100), but a range of other changes in our lives – both negative and positive – can result in a sense of dislocation. (Graduating from high school or college gets a Holmes-Rahe rating of 26.)

Change is difficult, even for young people, who are less set in their ways than old codgers like me. Yesterday morning, in a moment of whimsy, I decided to shave off my beard and mustache. Jean has never seen my upper lip, but it was our eight-year-old son Cameron’s response that really struck me. He was really upset when he saw me; granted I look a little different. But Cameron’s response was, “You look bad...really!”

Transitions are tough. If you are one of those parents of a graduate today, especially a high school graduate who might be leaving home, I’d imagine that you are experiencing a bit of emotional dislocation, which is quite normal. There is a sense of the unknown, both for your young adult offspring and for yourselves.

Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* talks about an unknown region, and it’s appropriate both for our graduates and to the ascension of Jesus, which certainly falls into the “transition” category. The poem is Whitman’s dialogue with his own soul:

Darest thou now O soul,  
Walk out with me toward the unknown region,  
Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow.

No map there, no guide,  
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,  
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor eyes, are in that land.

I know it not O soul,  
Nor dost thou, all is a blank before us,  
All waits undreamed of in that region, that inaccessible land.

Till when the ties loosen,  
All but the ties eternal, time and space,  
Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds bounding us.

Then we burst forth, we float,  
In time and space O soul, prepared for them,  
Equal, equipt at last, (O joy! O fruit of all!) them to fulfil O soul.



Imagine yourself as one of the apostles. You’ve been with Jesus himself. You’ve witnessed his crucifixion. (What terror must that have been like? 9/11 by a factor of ten?) You’ve witnessed the resurrected Jesus, and some of you are in utter disbelief. And then you’ve had 40 days with the risen Christ. And just when you thought things

couldn't get any weirder, he's gone again, carried aloft by a cloud! Undoubtedly, you're asking, "Where did he go? And why did he leave us here behind?" How are you feeling the next day? *Angry*, that Jesus is gone yet again? *Bewildered*, not knowing if he'd be back again next week? *Grief*, that maybe he's gone for good this time? And the question you probably keep posing is, "Well, now what?!"

Those of you who are old enough or who grew up in the Episcopal church may remember the traditional words of the Nicene Creed: "He will come again to judge the quick and the dead." Well, perhaps Jesus will return to judge us, but now what?! And what do you think Jesus would say about the state of the world if he were to show up today? Would he be impressed by technology? How do you think he's judge the way we are treating the poor among us? Would he appreciate our affluence and how we're using our influence? What do imagine he'd say about what's on TV? Would he rather watch "Survivor," "Wall Street Week," "The 700 Club," or would he cut bait and settle for the Teletubbies?

You're undoubtedly familiar with the series of best-selling apocalyptic fiction by Tim LaHaye that started with the novel, *Left Behind*. The novels have sold millions, and they've made LaHaye, who co-founded the Moral Majority, a very rich man. The novels concern what Fundamentalists call "the Rapture." The literal meaning of the word "rapture" means to be carried away, as in the way a raptor carries off a mouse, vole, or trout. (I like the "soaring ecstasy" experience better than being carried off by a bird of prey.) "The Rapture," as they talk about it, is the idea that we're all going to suddenly disappear and float up through the clouds to be with Jesus. I went to a website called RaptureReady.com, and it said this: "At an unknown hour and day the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven, while remaining in the air, he will snatch his Bride, the Church, out from among this sinful world. Christ then takes the Church to heaven for the 7 year wedding feast. The earthly reason for the removal of the Church is to make way for the rise of Antichrist and to fulfill Daniel's final 70th week."

I know that there are not a lot of you in the pews at Plymouth who are here for that reason, but generation after generation of Christians have waited for the second coming, often in particularly unattractive ways: killing Muslims in a crusade, trying to "convert" people who didn't believe in your particular way, and supporting the Israeli nation-state no matter what (not for the good of Israelis themselves, but to hasten the "last days.")

And as I alluded last week, the apocalyptic hope of the first century was something they expected right there and then, and it needs to be seen in light of the historical context of that time and place. Walter Rauschenbusch, the great German Baptist minister of the Social Gospel, called it "a debased hope."

I've always been amused by that bumper sticker that says, "In the event of the Rapture, this car will be vacated." Curt Minter told me, with a glimmer in his eye, that one day he'd followed a Jaguar for hours with that bumper sticker, hoping that he'd assume ownership of the car when the Rapture came.



We can take the Ascension literally or we can take it seriously. I think it's important that we look at the context of the Acts of the Apostles. Some who are familiar with the book would identify its literary genre as historical narrative. But, when I was in seminary and took an course on Acts, New Testament scholar Dennis MacDonald identified its genre as historical fiction. I don't go quite that far. (It's better than *Gone with the Wind*.) I think it was a best attempt at historical recreation and promotion for Christians and prospective Christians, trying to explain why Jesus was gone and how

the early church tried to cope. It isn't historical in the sense of modern history, most of which attempts to provide an account from the position of a fairly neutral observer, and it isn't written as though it's a strategically placed hidden camera that captures every word and movement. And if the Acts of the Apostles is fiction, it's much better in a literary sense than *Left Behind*.

As they waited for Jesus to reappear, I imagine the apostles saying, "Well, now what are we supposed to do?" And, of course, Jesus had already told them. "You will be my witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and all the earth." If you look for a moment at the UCC logo, you'll notice that it contains a special kind of cross. It's called the cross triumphant, and it contains a crown to represent the kingdom of God, the cross of Jesus, and the orb, which is divided into three portions, representing Judea, Samaria, and all the world.

Jesus didn't say, "Go out and warn people that the Rapture is coming, so you'd better believe it and be good." No, the last words spoken by Jesus to the apostles were to go out and tell people everywhere what you know about me and the message I've brought: that *compassion* is more important than purity; that *justice* isn't just for the prophets of old; that the *kingdom of God* is among you right now. I'd imagine that some of the apostles said, "What are we waiting for?!" Let's get busy continuing the work that Jesus began. And there were others that just tried to figure out what had happened.

In the 16th century, the Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila wrote these words, which are among my favorites:

"Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
no hands but yours,  
no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which Christ's  
compassion is to look out to the world.

Yours are the feet with which Christ is  
to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which Christ  
is to bless all people now."



Why wait to act for the poor and oppressed? Why wait to commit yourself to an engaged faith that matters not just to you, but to those whose lives you touch? We may be journeying into an unknown region, but we are traveling together, and we know that God is with us.

There is no need to wait. I would assert that while the body of Jesus is not here, the risen Christ is in our midst. And as we look forward to the celebration of Pentecost next Sunday, we know that the Holy Spirit, whose love embraces and empowers us, is among us and within us. Amen.