

7 Easter, Year C  
May 20, 2007

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This particular Sunday in the Church year has always been especially intriguing for me. Last Thursday was the feast day of the Ascension. As we heard in the reading from the Book of Acts this morning, when Jesus had been raised from the dead, he appeared to the disciples in his resurrected state over a period of forty days. And on this particular day, the disciples ask the resurrected Jesus about what is going to happen next.

“Are you going to restore the kingdom of Israel now?” they ask. What happens now?

Jesus tells them, essentially, it’s none of their business. “It’s not for you to know these things,” he says. All you need to know is that you are going to receive power from the Holy Spirit and that you are to be my witnesses, carrying on the work that I have begun. In fact, he had said, you are going to do greater things than I have done. In other words, you can’t know what’s going to happen next. All you need to know is that what God has begun in me, God will now continue in you.

And with that, Jesus was taken from their sight.

So, Jesus is gone and the disciples are left wondering what’s going to happen next. The time between Jesus’ ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit is surely a time of some significant uncertainty, grief and even anxiety for the disciples. Now what?

This season of Ascensiontide is extremely brief, only ten days long, and it speaks of a strangely familiar theme in our lives. This very brief time in the lives of the disciples speaks of an ongoing, ever-recurring dynamic in our lives. What I mean is that throughout our lives, we are regularly forced to let go of something or someone we love, and we find ourselves in a kind of “in-betweeness,” grieving and perhaps longing for what we have lost, while we wait and wonder what in the world is going to happen next. These feelings of uncertainty and letting go, sometimes accompanied by a feeling of helplessness – these are feelings we all know well.

We know about letting go as we drop off a child for her first day of school and entrust her care to teachers and fellow students. We know about running alongside a small child, holding onto the bicycle until the last minute and then letting go – what happens next is out of our hands. We know about letting go when a child gets her driver’s license or when he graduates from high school and prepares to move away from home and into adulthood. We know about letting go when we move – leaving behind a home, friends, church, a job, and a host of familiar and comfortable circumstances in order to take up residence in a strange, new place where we might not know a soul.

And we know about the dynamic of letting go when we are forced to say goodbye to a parent or friend who is dying, or even letting go as our own bodies age – letting go of a

driver's license as our eyesight fails us, and letting go of beloved activities simply because our bodies can't do them anymore.

Like the disciples in the season between the Ascension and Pentecost, we know about having to let go of something we love, sometimes watching as it is taken away from us, wishing we didn't have to watch this thing or this person as they are taken away, and then having to wait with some uncertainty and even anxiety for what might happen next.

It seems to me that letting go, as hard as it is at times, is at the heart of the Christian life. The central image and symbol of the Christian life is the cross, and it is perhaps the most poignant reminder that surrender and letting go are what bring us closest to God and each other. Having to trust, having to give ourselves to something we cannot see and cannot know ... and trust that what happens next is in the hands of a God who loves us and numbers the hairs of our heads.

In stretching out his arms on the cross, Jesus shows us how the act of letting go can also be an act of embrace. Because as painful as this can be, we are opening ourselves to an unknown future, and it is an unknown future that will be determined by a loving God who knows what we need before we can ask.

This is how we are invited to live – not holding on tightly to every good thing that comes our way, but holding all things lightly and always being prepared to let go in order to welcome what God has prepared for us next. When our arms are locked in a suffocating embrace or our fist is clenched tightly onto something we love, we are likely to squeeze the life out of that which we love, and we are no longer available to welcome the new thing that God is doing in our life.

We Episcopalians, with our deep love of tradition, can be especially bad about this sort of thing. “Behold, I am doing a new thing,” God says through the prophet Isaiah, “even now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?”

The answer is that often we do not see it, or at least I don't see it. We can be so focused on the old thing, on beloved traditions, on what is being taken away, that we cannot perceive the new thing God is doing. And at times we even hold onto traditions so tightly that when we feel threatened, we use the old as a club with which we can beat down or fend off the new.

Letting go is perhaps one of the greatest challenges of our lives. Our egos very naturally form attachments to particular people and situations, as well as to certain outcomes in our lives. And these attachments can become exceedingly important to us, so that letting go is enormously painful, especially when we can't see what is ahead or know what is going to happen next. We know what we have loved and what has sustained us, but we are not so sure we can trust what might be next if we let go.

Yet, this is what we mean when we say that the Christian life is a life of faith. We do not mean that the Christian life is a life of believing that certain doctrines and dogmas are

true, or that when we have a hard time understanding a particular article of the creed that we are simply supposed to believe it “on faith.” No, what we mean by “faith” is that the Christian life is a life of trust, a life symbolized by open hands and outstretched arms, a life of welcoming many various blessings from God and yet constantly letting go in order to welcome and embrace what God has prepared for those who love him. Christians are not control freaks; they are trust freaks.

As Joseph Campbell once said, “We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned so as to accept the life that is waiting for us.”

After Jesus had been taken away from them, the disciples stood gazing up into heaven. And two men stood by them in white robes, the Bible tells us, and said to them, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?...” Sometimes we can be so focused on what has been, we can dwell overly much on our particular hopes and longed-for outcomes, or we can cling so tenaciously to our own plans, that we are not available to accept the life that is waiting for us in the here and now.

This season of Ascension tide perhaps invites each of us to ask ourselves, “Is there something I need to let go of, in order to be more fully available to receive something unexpected from God? Can I let go as a person of faith, with the trust and assurance that God has prepared for me more than I could ask or imagine?”