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Luke 24:44-53

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### "A Blessing in the Midst of Change"

I don't like to say goodbye. I am sure many of you do not either. I say a lot of goodbyes to my family in Russia every time I go there and then leave for the United States. Last time I left for the States was two years ago. My brother, Igor, dropped me off at the airport, helped me with my luggage, and went with me to the place where I had to go to the gate area. I reached to give him a goodbye kiss and a hug and said: "Goodbye." He said this was not a goodbye yet. He said that he actually would not be leaving but to go to a place outside the airport where he can see the airplanes take off and he would wave goodbye to me when my plane was taking off. He told me which side of the plane I should sit on. When I got into the plane, I found my seat and then saw that there was a free seat on the side of the plane that my brother told me I should be in. So I quickly took that seat and started to look at the window anticipating seeing my brother. The plane left the gate and started to gain the needed speed to take off. I was glued to the window and also trying to have my camera ready to capture the moment my brother would wave to me. When the plane started to go very fast and we were about to take off I finally saw Igor standing on the hill and waving to me. It happened so quickly, it took just a second for my eyes to register that that little small person waving at me was my brother. Of course it took me many moments to recall that scene in my mind and not without having tears in my eyes. It did not feel like a goodbye but rather than a blessing. There was something about Igor looking at the plane with such love and faithfulness, and waving at me with a childlike manner that every time I share this with others, it brings tears to their eyes. Just like Igor was waving at the plane that was taking me far away from him, I imagine the disciples waving at Jesus, as he was being taken far away from them.

In these last verses of the Gospel of Luke, we see the last moments that Jesus spent with the disciples here on earth. After Jesus broke the bread with them and ate with them after his resurrection, he opened the disciples' eyes as he explained to them the meaning of his ministry, death and resurrection according to the scriptures. And then Jesus took them out to the place on the mount of Olives which is outside of the old city and was ascended into heaven blessing them. It is sort of a goodbye scene. Jesus' ministry on earth ended and now Jesus was ascending to the

reality of heaven to be with God. From there he will send the Holy Spirit to empower the disciples to continue the mission of love and forgiveness of sins starting in Jerusalem. I can't help but pause here to acknowledge what is happening in the Holy Land. It is extremely sad that in the 21st century the land of peace and where the Gospel took off is undergoing such turmoil. Strike upon strike. Retaliation upon retaliation. I imagine Jesus weeping over this and over all the children and adults killed in the last few days.

But back to the scene in Luke's Gospel. It was the last moments of Jesus with his disciples. And they all knew that a change was coming. Jesus would not be with them anymore in-person. The disciples now were the ones to continue the mission and become the body of Christ on earth. The disciples had to figure everything out from there on. A transition was underway.

Of course, there are a lot of transitions going on these days in our lives. Graduations from high school and college, weddings, transitions from the school year to the summer time and what that looks like for families and teachers. Transition from the year of the pandemic and lock down into a life that is more and more open to opportunities to be out, go places, enjoy gathering and eating together, do more as a church in mission and ministry. Let's name the elephant in the room that we as a church are going through a pastoral transition. Pastor Larry is retiring in about a month or so and Pastor Justin will be joining us as a senior pastor. Some of you probably ask questions like, "What will Pastor Justin be like? What changes will he be making? How will that affect me and our congregation?"

Transitions are never easy and they are full of anxiety, stress, and fear of the unknown. But that is not what we see in the disciples when Jesus left them. To my surprise, instead of fear and anxiety, instead of clinging to Jesus' feet and screaming at him "don't go!" (at least that is how I imagine myself being in the disciples' place), we read in the text that they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. They stayed in the temple and kept praising God. Why were they not grieving this goodbye with Jesus? Why were they acting like he was not leaving them at all? Why did the ascension of Jesus bring joy and not fear to them?

The way Luke tells this story it is almost like the disciples knew that Jesus was not leaving them. You see, the ascension of Jesus marks an important part of our Christian theology. We do not only read about the ascension in Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, but liturgically, many Christian traditions observe this as a feast every year the Sunday before Pentecost, the last Sunday of Easter. Do you remember, the Ascension of Jesus is an important part of the Apostles' creed that

we speak to affirm our faith. “He ascended into heaven where he is sitting at the right hand the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth”. Ascension means that Jesus ascended in his human scarred body in the heavenly realm to be with God almighty forever. I use the word “heavenly realm” very intentionally as perhaps many of you, I do not see heavens as something up there in the sky up in the clouds. According to a very familiar to us theologian, NT Wright, heaven is not a place but rather a different spiritual dimension where Christ reigns across time and space. And because of that, the risen and ascended Christ’s presence permeates all time and space. If we are thinking and worried about what the future holds, the risen and ascended Christ then lives in the future as well. I read the article by Rev. Dr. Luke Bouman, a Lutheran minister in Texas on the ascension and its significance. He writes,

“Risen Jesus belongs to the future, then we can understand that he has also ascended to that same future. When we proclaim our faith in the ascended one, we are proclaiming that despite events that seem to contradict it, we can see and participate in the future Reign of God with Jesus in the here and now. We experience, not the absence of our Lord, but his real and life transforming presence. The marvel of this is that if Jesus goes to the future ahead of us, then there is no place in our journey that we now go where Jesus is not there to greet us.”

Which means Jesus’ presence was with the disciples even when Jesus left this earth and he was not present with them in-person. The awesome significance of the ascension is that Jesus is alive and goes before us. What it means for us is that when transitions and change happen, Jesus goes before us, paving the way forward and also, blessing us on our way just as Jesus blessed the disciples.

You see, Jesus could not leave the disciples without blessing them as they would be embarking on a journey of serving Christ and be his church in the world sharing the message of transformation and change of hearts. It is an ancient Jewish tradition to give a blessing when a major threshold of life was crossed, getting married or engaged, becoming a king or a priest. And of course Jesus could not leave his disciples without blessing them on such a major threshold in their lives and ministry.

Friends, it was not a goodbye scene between Jesus and the disciples, after all. In the Russian language, there are two ways to say goodbye, the one that means “Goodbye forever” and the other one – that means, “will see you again.” So it was a “will see you again kind of scene.” Jesus’ blessing, his presence were with them as

they continued the story and the mission of Jesus' inclusive and radical love and we know that the story did not end with them. Jesus' blessing and his presence are with us in the midst of our lives together as we continue that story of love. In the midst of transitions and changes, our blessing is CHrist's presence with us always, till the end of the age. So friends, today, the invitation is then to open up our hands and arms wide and receive the blessing of Christ's presence with us who goes before us and sends us forth to be his people, the people of love, to continue Jesus' story. Amen.