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Waving Bye

Acts 1:1-11 "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

It's one of the earliest things we learn, isn't it? Parents teach it to their children from their first few months of life; it's often the first gesture that they learn: "*Can you wave bye-bye to auntie? Wave bye-bye?*" Some children get really good at it. At one of the airports I was in recently, I was waiting for my plane there at the gate and a little girl – probably 10 months old – across from me was furiously waving bye-bye at me. In fact, if I'd been less secure, I might have wondered why this baby wanted to be rid of me. *Bye-Bye. Bye-bye.* And we can't help but wave back, can we? It's a real sourpuss who finds it possible to ignore or be irritated by a baby practicing his or her new-found skill of waving bye-bye. And although we get a little more sophisticated at it as we grow up, saying goodbye, waving bye-bye, if you will, remains something important. It seems terribly important to us to send people off in a good and thoughtful and hospitable fashion. I know a counselor who tells couples who are about to be married that their goodbyes are the most important thing that will do in their marriage –

and so they should never ever simply walk out on the other, or hang up the phone on one another, no matter how angry they get, without saying goodbye. And there are indeed too many sad stories about a husband or wife whose last memory is of harsh words said, a slammed door, a car tearing out of the driveway and then one of them suddenly dies that day and the other one grieves that the last parting had no real goodbye, but only those harsh words, spoken in anger. Goodbyes are important. After all, the very meaning of the word is a contraction of the phrase “God be with you.” And all Godly things deserve to be done well. There is a lovely custom in Hawaii, derived from the Japanese influence, concerning goodbyes: I never drove away from anyone’s house in Hawai`i where the person I went to visit didn’t come out the door and wave bye to me until I was out of sight. It was a way of honoring and respecting one’s guests, by sending them forth with aloha and with love, sending them forth with a blessing, as it were.

Yes, goodbyes are important. Today’s scripture, the final one for the Easter season, is about **Jesus’** final goodbye, about Jesus’ waving bye-bye, if you will. It is typically called “the Ascension” and you can see why; the story says that as the disciples watched, Jesus was *“lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”* And I can imagine him waving bye, as he left. Now, in most mainline churches, we don’t often focus on or even preach on this story. Why? Well, in our modern scientific age it can seem almost a little embarrassing, certainly a little odd. Unlike those ancient folks 2000 years ago, we don’t believe in a literal three-story universe, with hell below our feet and heaven “up there.” Modern science has taught us that not only is the universe unimaginably big, but that the very idea of “up” is relative to wherever you happen to be. And geologists have taught us that underneath our feet is molten earth, not another reality where the lives of the damned somehow live on. So we’re not quite sure what to do with this story. But did you know that the for the first several centuries of the

church's life, Ascension Day was almost as big a holiday as Easter? In its earliest days the church celebrated both Jesus' resurrection and his ascension with songs and worship and partying. The writer of the books of Luke and Acts thought the story was an important enough story to tell it twice, once at the end of Luke and once at the beginning of Acts. The Ascension became part of both the Apostles and the Nicene Creeds, those statements of belief from the first centuries of the church's life. So we ought not dismiss the Ascension too quickly as a quaint story that has little to say to us, leftover from a time when folks didn't know much science. For what is important to this story is not the portrayal of Jesus' celestial elevator ride up into the clouds of heaven, but the **meaning** of that story. As with so many Biblical stories that are couched in concepts of the day, the point is not to take them **literally**, but to take them **seriously**. So what indeed might this story, this last appearance of Jesus to His disciples after his resurrection, his last earthly manifestation before the day of Pentecost, have to teach us. Let me name two things I think that this story teaches us: It teaches us **where to cast our eyes**, and **where to put our feet**.

Where to cast our eyes. Did you notice those wonderful lines near the end of this passage? *"While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"* I love those lines. I can just see the disciples standing there, as you and I probably would have as well, mouths agape looking up into those clouds. But those two "men in white robes" suggested that that was not at all where they **should** be looking, not at all where they **should** be casting their eyes. Now, by the way, whenever we hear scripture talk about two men it means something important is happening. It was two men who visited the tent of Abraham and Sarah and who proved to be angels from God sent to announce to the couple that God would bless them with a child even in their old age. It was two men who, after Jesus' death, were trudging on

that Emmaus Road, dispirited and defeated, whom Jesus joined and showed them in the breaking of bread that he was still alive. In John's gospel, on Easter morning, it is two men dressed in white who tell Mary and Mary that Jesus had risen. And now in our story for today, it is two men again. And they say, "*Guys, why are you looking up to the sky? Cast your eyes elsewhere!*" Rev. Barbara Lundblad tells this wonderful story: "Not long ago," she says,

I saw a wonderful picture of Jesus' ascension. It was a black and white woodcut print.... In the picture Jesus is rising up as the disciples watch him disappear into the clouds. [But] If you look closely at the picture, not in the clouds, but on the ground, you can see footprints on the earth. The artist has carefully etched Jesus' footprints down on the level where the disciples are standing with their mouths open. [This is the artist's way of asking the story's] question, "Why do you stand looking up into heaven? Look at these footprints here on the earth." Jesus' muddy footprints are all over the pages...."¹

"*Jesus' muddy footprints are all over the pages....*" They **are** all over the pages of the New Testament, showing us a the face of a God of gentle justice. They lie alongside the footprints of those folks in our world who know too much of the world's horror, too much of war and violence. Those footprints are alongside those of those sad bands of boys of nine and ten years old who wander Darfur in the Sudan because their parents have been killed in the civil war. Jesus' footprints are there beside the footprints of ordinary folks who do extraordinary things who never thought they could. They are the footprints of the One who walked alongside of Mother Teresa and Dr. Mother Luther King and Abraham Lincoln, and they are the footprints of the One who walks beside those countless other folks whose names will never be household words but who day by day put one foot in front of the other seeking to try to make the world a better place,

¹"Footprints on the Earth," <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=495>

seeking in some small way to lighten someone's load, trying to walk however imperfectly on a path that would trust God and not the ways of the world. Don't look up to heaven, the story tells us, but look down, **look down and see Jesus' footprints and resolve to follow him.**

Because, secondly, the story of the Ascension indeed shows us that having cast our eyes back down to the ground to see Jesus' footprints in the midst of the ordinary everydayness of this world, we are indeed invited to make **our** feet go the same way. I have to tell you, though, that it's tempting not to. It's much, much easier to simply stay there looking into whatever heavens immobilize us. It is easier to stay stuck sometimes, gazing longingly at nostalgia for the way things used to be. It is easier to stay stuck, eyes fixed on taking care of ourselves, our band, our tribe, our community. It is easier to gaze fondly at the illusion that we can keep things changeless and that if we aim our eyes at the clouds then the muddy and murky realities of life lived on this earth won't affect us, and we won't have to deal with the changes that are occurring in our culture, in our lives, in our relationships, and even in our church. It sometimes seems easier to stay stuck in a pattern of behavior that may be hurting your life, hurting your relationships, for the thought of going in a different way is just immobilizing indeed. And, my friends, I understand that urge; I do. Life is complex. Change seems to happen too fast. We grow up and we get old and we learn that love isn't as pure as we wanted it to be, and that even people who love each other hurt each other. We discover that new folks around us have new ways of doing things, different approaches to life, to work, to church. And we may want to keep our gaze focused somewhere else because the footsteps we are called to follow here on the messy, muddy earth seem too hard sometimes.

But we really don't have much choice. For in **any** aspect of life, if we decide to

circle the wagons, hunker down, and take our eyes away from the realities around us, we may feel good – for awhile. But I know of too many relationships, though, that have fallen apart, finally, because those involved pretended for a long time that they could keep their eyes elsewhere, looking at some idyllic but false picture of what they wanted to be instead of what they actually were. I even know of some churches that decided to keep their eyes fixed anywhere but on the realities around them, and who thereby failed to respond to the very real changes and the very real opportunities that came their way – and eventually they too died.

If we want to live, and certainly if we want to live abundantly, we have to place our feet where Jesus placed his feet, dealing with the realities of life and relationships, creatively and courageously confronting change. And the Ascension story is finally the **assurance** that Jesus indeed will go with us as our feet follow the footsteps He has made. In fact, paradoxically, the very fact that Jesus ascends into heaven is actually the sign that guarantees that he is always with us! Why do I say that? Well, consider how the Gospel of Mark tells the story of the Ascension; Mark always much terser than the other Gospels, simply says *“After the Lord Jesus had spoken to [the disciples], he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.”* *“At the right hand of God.”* Do you know where that phrase comes from? Do you know what it means? In Jesus’ time, it was said that *“the right hand of Caesar”* was everywhere. It was a figure of speech that meant that there was no place in the known world where the power of Rome did not reach. So for Jesus to be depicted as ascending to God, seated on God’s right hand, is really a highly symbolic way of describing a very important truth. It is the truth that we first saw disclosed on Easter morning, but now comes full circle and is re-stated again. Jesus Christ is at the right hand of God, and thus it is finally the power of suffering love that is ultimate in this world. Jesus Christ is at the right hand of God, and therefore the Spirit of Christ will never abandon us as we seek to put our feet

where Jesus put his feet – to **serve** this messy, muddy, murky world with all its opportunity and imperfection, all its glory and its miseries. The story of the Ascension is the **guarantee** that Christ will never abandon us even when we strike out on new paths that are scary but which hold the promise of revitalizing a hurting relationship or freeing you from a pattern that has trapped you. For you see, the story is not about Jesus **leaving** us, but about Christ's promise that He will always go with us and we will always be near to the heart of God. A preacher by the name of John McClure beautifully puts the point this way:

We grow and change.... We endure disease and violence. We live with the sometimes painful rhythm of suffering and death. We make mistakes and we commit sins..... This ascension of Jesus Christ is good news.... It means that God... will transform our fragile and broken humanity in Christ. It means that, at the Ascension, Jesus took all of human life, which he cared for so deeply, and brought it ... into the very heart of God. This includes the suffering refugee, the abused child or spouse, the victim of war or terror, the lonely one in the nursing home, the one who struggles with depression or a lost sense of worth and value, those who are sick, all who are in difficult transitions in life.²

And, finally, in the end, this story promises us a grand homecoming. Did you hear it? The two men say at the conclusion of the story, *"This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go...."* But I think that that is not so much about the clouds and the dramatic mode of transportation, but about what Jesus was **doing** when he left: **he was blessing them**. In other words, whenever Jesus returns to us – which is not only at the end of time but at any time when the Spirit of Christ finds you and walks with you – He comes with the very same spirit in which he left, the very same spirit with which he waved goodbye, and that is the spirit of **blessing**

²McClure, <http://www.pcusa.org/today/believe/past/may02/ascension.htm>

for every creature, for everyone, for you and for me. And so the job for us as we would follow him, in this time between His going and His coming again is to continue to be a blessing ourselves.³ And in order that we might be able to do that, here in this often muddy and messy world, our prayer might just need to be that wonderful line from jazz musician Herbie Hancock: “Feets, don’t fail me now; feets, don’t fail me now!”

³The suggestion that reading “he will return as he left” as being about *blessing*, not *transportation*, is Professor Joey Jeter’s, and I have taken it from Rev. Barbara Blasidell’s sermon “God Bless You,” preached at the Ola`a Church, Keauu, Hawaii, on November 19, 2006. I have also gratefully adapted some of Rev. Blasidell’s words and phrasing in this final paragraph.