
"Do You Know Where Your Upper Room Is?"

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton

Easter 7 A

Acts 1:6-14

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My junior year in college became one of unexpected transitions. Having been abroad in the Middle East during the first semester, I returned to my small liberal arts college forever changed. That experience yielded many external changes in my life as well.

When I returned to Albion, I found my former roommate living with someone else, unwilling to acknowledge me on campus. I broke up with my high school sweetheart because I could no longer imagine a future together. I found myself increasingly frustrated by the fact that so much that had been a comfort, now felt smothering. I was done with the old, but had no idea what the new might be. And frankly I had no patience with the idea that this place of discomfort was likely to last for another year and a half when I could graduate and move on.

I did not enjoy that place of unknowing. So, I did what many of us do in that situation. I sprang into action. But it was not the action of careful discernment. It was the action of desperation and clarity at all costs.

One afternoon, I ran into one of my economics professors in the hallway. He mentioned that he had been reading about a program at the University of Michigan he thought I should consider. Dr. Saltzman told me that I could start a master's in public policy during my senior year, and then the credits would transfer back to Albion. Well, it didn't take me more than about three seconds to decide that was my ticket out. I ran to my advisor, who confirmed the option, signed up for the GRE's a week later and waited to hear whether I would have my escape.

I was thrilled to descend into the basement mailroom one afternoon and find an acceptance letter. Nothing could stop me and I was ready to move forward. I was not looking back.

As a member of the college choir, we were expected to remain on campus after classes ended to sing for graduation before heading home. I arrived at the ceremony prepared to meet my last obligation and then spring unencumbered to my new life. But music has a funny way of not allowing you to ignore the movements of your soul. During the last piece, I became overwhelmed with emotion, and simply could not stop crying. I remember saying goodbye to my organ professor choking my thanks and ruefully accepting the offer of several kleenex.

People who I had dismissed as unimportant in the past months, I now clung to as if I was a drowning person. I all of a sudden longed to see my old boyfriend and hugged my ex-roommate as if nothing had ever happened between us. If I had been given the opportunity to erase all the decisions to change and move, I would have done it in a heartbeat.

I wonder whether this is some of what the disciples experienced during Jesus' ascension. This is such a strange part of our Christian tale. While it is awfully hard to wrap our minds around the improbability of resurrection, you just can't avoid it if you want to be Christian. But the Ascension? Jesus going up in a cloud? That is a little easier for us to avoid.

The Feast of the Ascension was a much more celebrated feast in the early church. The importance of Jesus' return to heaven to rule in power was seen a crucial to our own reception of the Holy Spirit. We could not simply have Jesus roaming the earth like a beefed up version of Marley's ghost from The Christmas Carol. No, we needed the cycle complete.

Jesus came down from heaven, lived, died, and was resurrected. Now the fullness of his resurrected humanity is gathered up and returned to the life of God. It is not only important that Jesus became human and walked the earth. For us to fully participate in the life of God, we need to know that our full humanity, warts and all, has been incorporated into the eternal.

But you almost wish we had a more plausible story to hang our hats on. In Acts we see during Jesus' last appearance with the disciples, they are still trying to get answers. O.K., we have started to accept that you are with us again. We don't fully understand it of course, but we are over the shock enough to start to think things through. So Jesus, does this mean the fulfillment of all things will now happen? That we as your disciples will see the full restoration of Israel?

You might think that after everything the disciples have been through, they now qualified as those who were entitled to know how things were going to play out. But, no. Once again they are told that they do not get to know the hour or the season. Then to top it off, Jesus goes up in a cloud and they are left there slack jawed with their necks straining to see what on earth has just happened. I find it hard to believe that knowing that Elijah had a similar departure from the earth would have provided much comfort at the time.

Having barely acclimated themselves to the notion of Jesus' resurrection, to see him going off in a cloud must have been disconcerting to say the least. They might have stayed their frozen in time had not these two gentlemen in the white clothes called them back to attention. But while they ask them why they are staring into the heavens, they do not actually provide much in the way of helpful advice.

The disciples are stuck in the in-between. They are not ever going to go back to the way things have been, but they have no idea what the coming power of the Spirit will really look like. Jesus has given them their new job description, they are to be his witnesses. But that must have felt as foreign as the notion of returning to their fishing nets.

They are confronted with the unknown and so they do what many of us do in that situation, they reach for the familiar. They go back to the upper room. They go back to the place where Jesus had the last supper with them and where he has appeared to them since the resurrection. They go back and account for themselves. They acknowledge that Judas Iscariot is not among them. They find Mary, the mother of Jesus.

But what impresses me the most is that they do not spring into unthinking action. They accept the uncertainty, the ambiguity, and all the emotions that are in attendance, and they wait. And they pray.

We find ourselves in these places of transition more times than we prefer. We may have graduated from one school, but not yet gone on to next. We have found out we are expecting a child, but now have to wait for the birth. We may have lost our job, but not found the next one. Someone we love may have died, but we really cannot imagine what life will look like without them.

We are stuck in the threshold between one place and the next. And in these times the Ascension has something to teach us. It can teach us how we wait. We do not have to yield to our anxiety and spring into action. We do not need to become immobilized by our emotions and wish that nothing had ever changed. We do not need to find ourselves constantly frustrated because our waiting is not over.

Instead, we can seek out the people who will help us wait. We can gather with them and pray with one another. We can tell stories about the old and wonder what the new ones will be. We can name our losses and wonder aloud what is to come. We can even toss around a few plans, if we don't become too attached to them.

We cannot control when we come into these places of transition. We cannot control how long they will last. But we can choose how we will wait. And, who we will wait with.

Do you know where your upper room is?

Amen

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