

The Ascension of our Lord + May 13, 2018

“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.”

I have a hunch why the apostles were gazing in the sky and looking toward heaven. Jesus, lifted up before their very eyes, disappeared from their sight and though they could no longer see him, their eyes were turned in his direction. Maybe they hoped he would reappear, or maybe they thought they could get a glimpse of Jesus from a distance. Most of all, I suspect they were frozen in their posture because of the suddenness of it all and the plain fact that they didn't want to see him go.

Jesus was with them for 40 days after the Resurrection. He touched them and taught them. He ate with them. Jesus, after the Resurrection appeared in the flesh, like he did before the Resurrection. The Ascension signals a change, a transition. Jesus would no longer be with them in the same way.

I imagine many questions lingered in their minds as they gazed into heaven:

- Where did he go?
- When will he return?
- Has Jesus abandoned us?
- Now what?
- What's next?
- What will we do now?

I think the time between Jesus' ascension and the Day of Pentecost was an interim period, an in-between time filled with endings and beginnings. For the apostles, it was the end of the world as they knew it. Jesus' ascension marked the ending of the way they knew Jesus and the beginning of a new kind of relationship with Jesus. They were instructed to wait for the Spirit to come, but they didn't know when or how the Spirit would come. Everything probably seemed up for grabs.

Transitions are like that. They are fraught with feelings and questions about the unknown. What will happen next? Then there's the reality of saying farewell and beginning anew. And the movement between the two has its own set of challenges. Ask anyone who has tripped over unpacked boxes in the home they just moved into. There is excitement and joy and there is grief and loss. It happens with any change.

Speaking of transitions, have you noticed that our congregation is getting younger? This is the year of new babies at PRLC! It's a good thing. Newborns are all around us and I can see the joy and the excitement in the eyes of their parents. Each couple has a unique story to share, but I suspect all of the new parents among us will tell you that their lives have changed, big time!

There are beginnings and there are endings – new routines, new schedules, new duties like changing diapers and perhaps the end of uninterrupted sleep.

I remember 2007 as a time of big transition in my life. In one year, I moved on from one congregation, received a call in another congregation, got married, and moved over 500 miles to a new home. The wedding, driving the U-Haul, and the move and starting a new job all took place in one month. I am convinced all this was made possible nothing less than the grace of God.

We know of transitions. We know of endings and beginnings. Birth, death, divorce, moving, relocating, an old job and a new job, graduation from school and all such adventures are filled with a host of feelings and experiences.

I think we're in a bit of a transition time here at PRLC. Today we celebrate the ministry of Nancy Monelli. She is leaving her position as Children and Family Minister and is moving on to other adventures and vocations. I am happy to report that Roy and Nancy are sticking around, but now we will know Nancy in a different way. We will miss working with her in her familiar role. I will miss working with her on a daily basis. If that's not enough, there's another transition in the works. Valerie will be retiring from the organ bench after 32 years. It is good news that John and Valerie will also continue to make PRLC their home. Still, I will miss, we will miss, Valerie's extraordinary gift of making music among us. As I ponder these two staffing changes here at PRLC, I have already begun the process of grieving. Like many transitions, you may be asking yourself:

- What's next?
- Who will carry on these ministries?
- Where do we go from here?
- Will something change?

It's altogether normal, in the face of uncertainty, to wonder about these things and get a little anxious and even fearful because we do not know what the future holds even as the work of hiring new staff takes place. I hope you will believe me when I say, "It's going to be okay."

Even as we wait and pray and live in the in-between time, it's okay. God has not abandoned us. God is with us. Even if we do not know the specifics of who will fill these ministry roles, God is with us in the waiting. God is in the transition, meeting us where we are.

A dear friend has as his motto, "The way is made by walking it." The motto came from someone who walked the long trek of El Camino de Santiago in Spain. Those who walk it say the destination is fine, but the destination is not the point. It's the journey itself, the process itself that is filled with the wonder of God.

Can we apply this same sort of motto to all our transition times, all our journeys, all our in-between moments, all our endings and beginnings, knowing and trusting and being attentive to God making God's self known along the way?

The apostles waited and prayed for the Spirit between the Ascension and Pentecost. This is a great way to imagine the church's posture in any age, called to wait and pray; but the waiting and praying is not idle. The angel's query, "Why do you stand looking toward heaven?" is a great prodding for the church. For even as we pray and wait we bear witness to the things of God and do the work of ministry.

Endings and beginnings. They happen. And God is in them.

Early last week, I joined Britt in attending the clergy conference for the Diocese of Olympia. One of the speakers was Tracey Lind, an Episcopal Priest who has been a valiant leader in the church and tireless voice for justice. At age 62, Traci learned that she had early-onset dementia. Her life has changed dramatically. She resigned her position as Dean of the Cathedral in Cleveland, Ohio. She has pulled back on many activities and now with memory loss and a different way of behaving, she has had to alter so many of her day-to-day routines and practices. Traci has not stopped doing ministry. Life has not ended. It's just that her ministry has changed and her life has changed. Now, along with her spouse, Emily, Traci travels the nations speaking about dementia, sharing her experience. She names it the "Spirituality of Dementia."

I was blown away by her testimony. She almost had me in tears. I was touched by Traci's courage. Emily spoke as well. They were refreshingly honest and vulnerable about their journey. They named their real pain and grief over the loss of how things used to be and I was moved by her witness to the things of God.

One of the realities of her dementia is the way she now manages time. She cannot now balance too many commitments at once, and therein lays the grace. Instead of fretting about the past or anxiously anticipating the future, she takes the time to be present. She describes her relationship to time now as living in the moment and the "here and now", and being available to God in a new and rich way. With the early-onset dementia, she feels childlike at times. This she sees as a blessing and as the way of faith, the posture of faith before Jesus who said "let the children come to me."

For Emily and Tracey, this new journey, this new transition has given them fresh opportunity to find meaning in their new life. More precisely to discover God in new ways. They like to quote the poet Rumi in one of the faith and life lessons they have learned: "Wherever you stand, be the soul of that place." In this new adventure with all of its grief and loss and weakness, I felt Emily and Traci were bearing witness to the Gospel truth that God's power is known in weakness.

Whatever your endings and beginnings may be, whatever your transitions may be, and whatever transitions we experience together as the people of PRLC, know that God is with us and in the journey itself, God may be known in new and fresh ways.

“Why do you stand looking toward heaven?” The Apostles did not remain gazing in the sky. They looked down and went back to the business of waiting and praying and bearing witness to the love of God.

We need not gaze upward either. Do not look toward the heavens. Instead look around. Look around and see that Christ is risen, risen indeed! Amen.