Sermon for The Feast of the Ascension

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, June 2, 2019
Text: Acts 1:1-11
Title: Ascension and loss

At the first parish I served after ordination, there was a highly regarded author and theologian – as close to a clergy celebrity as you get – on our regular preaching rotation. He came four times a year, always much anticipated, and, slowly, we got to know each other. We were on opposite ends of our lives and vocations: he had retired from a prestigious call a few years earlier and given himself over to travel, grandchildren, and writing, whereas I was just beginning my ministry and starting my family. Priesthood was a familiar garden for him, and a brave new world for me.

I recall one poignant, intimate conversation as we divested in the sacristy when I managed to get him – a rather shy person, actually – to open up. We ended up reflecting on the art of pastoral counseling and the things I’d found surprising about it in my first few months as clergy: how much more sensitive and challenging those conversations were than I had anticipated; how much I leaned on my own prayer life to support me in discerning the next right things to do and say. He nodded with understanding, and then he added, “But the hardest thing is when you see someone you love headed toward hardship, some time of trial, and you realize there isn’t anything you could say to help them avoid it, to spare them, and so you learn to be quiet, and to pray, and to wait.” And I nodded, because his words sounded deep and true and hard-won, but I also thought to myself, “Huh. I wonder what he is talking about?” Honestly, I just didn’t get it. So I’ve been amazed in the years since to begin to glimpse some small part of what he might have meant, to begin to understand, and to realize he was trying to share something quite profound with me about how we support one another in our spiritual growth.

Though I’ve never been a doctor or artist or lawyer or executive, I imagine that every profession involves some measure of growing into it: those moments when all the things more experienced surgeons used to tell you about bedside manner and the art of a difficult conversation suddenly click, and you understand what they were trying to say, and appreciate how completely you didn’t understand it until having the experience yourself. Or you stand before your team of hundreds ready to present, acutely aware of a comment a mentor made about
posture – how odd it seemed then, and how true it seems now. Or years into a daunting but deeply meaningful undertaking, you look back on all the ways your teachers or parents or bosses tried to prepare you for the path that lay ahead, and all the ways you misunderstood and even resisted their guidance.

It seems to me that this is probably how the disciples heard Jesus’ talk of ascension. Like his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection, Jesus has been talking to his closest friends about “ascending to the Father,” about taking his seat at the right hand of God, for a long time. He keeps telling them that this is going to happen, emphasizing that he is saying these things while he is still with them, because soon he won’t be with them. And they probably nodded, feeling that there was some depth and truth in his words, but it’s hard to imagine they really landed. It’s hard to imagine they really understood. I mean, how could they? There’s no precedent for anything like ascension in Judaism. There’s no logical explanation for Jesus’ final departure, not in death but full of life.

Yet Jesus insists that the ascension is good news, not only for him but for his followers, because he will be with God, and the Holy Spirit will be with us. This is a pivot point in sacred cosmology: a moment when how we relate to God shifts from inter-personal – us and Jesus - to intra-personal – God within and among us. But while there is hope and goodness and promise in today’s feast, the truth is the ascension continues to baffle many Christians. The idea of Jesus floating up, up and away, disappearing into the clouds, seems rather child-like and fantastical, the stuff of fairy tales, not faithful living. And even if Jesus has to go for the Holy Spirit to come, his absence is, understandably, distressing. It can even contribute to a kind of cognitive dissonance. What does it mean to say we are in relationship with Jesus, that we turn to and trust Jesus, that we are companioned and comforted by Jesus, when the broader arc of the story of our faith says Jesus is no longer here? Or when, as any child can tell you – just ask a Sunday School teacher - he’s not here in the ways the rest of us seem to be: flesh and blood, warm and wild. But I wonder if we aren’t put off by the ascension not because it is so unfamiliar but because it puts us in touch with something inside ourselves, something about our experience of our lives and our faith, that is a little too familiar. Not faraway and fantastical at all, but a little too close for comfort.
Pauline Boss is a celebrated family therapist and former professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota.\(^1\) As a student in the 1970s, she found herself fascinated with the experience of absence, both physical and psychological. At first, her research focused on people who were physically present but psychologically less and less present, or perhaps absent all together, like those living with severe mental illness or dementia. How do people cope with watching someone they love slip away, even as they continue to share meals and walks, even a bed? How do relationships change when one or more members of the family are so driven by work or addiction or some other compulsion that they show up for dinner but are gone most of the time?

As she gathered data and refined her focus, she also presented at various conferences. After one such presentation, a representative of the military offered her a wealth of data on a related but slightly different phenomenon – that of physical absence – from the records of families of soldiers who had gone missing in action in Vietnam. And this was the beginning of her becoming the leading expert on how people process unexpected, traumatic loss: the friend who goes hiking and disappears into the forest; the child whose abducted; the soldier who never comes home; the passengers on the plane that disappeared; the unrecovered victims of natural disaster. This kind of loss, marked by acute uncertainty and chaos, presents particular challenges. When someone we care dies or leaves or grows up, the divorce is finalized, or things fall apart, there are defined limits around the change: there’s a finality to the action, and while still excruciating those boundaries help us cope. But in the case of slow and incomplete losses, or sudden and unexpected ones, we humans tend to flounder. Do we hope for the person to come back? Do we accept that they are gone? Most people ricochet back and forth between such thoughts with exhausting urgency.

She eventually coined the term “ambiguous loss” to describe both the experience of physical absence and psychological presence – when you cannot stop thinking about someone or something that has been swept away – and physical presence and physiologically absence – like an absent parent or deteriorating partner. The first type of ambiguous loss seems uniquely particular: not that many people, relatively speaking, loose a loved one in this way. But the second type is uniquely universal: who hasn’t experienced some slow, excruciating slipping

away, leaving us reeling and unmoored, stuck in a strange wilderness of grief. Such experience seems to be a defining characteristic of the human experience, which is one of the reasons Dr. Boss resists the notion of closure. The very idea of closure, she argues – the notion that we can put our sadness and our grief in a tidy box and set it aside – is a myth we must learn to put aside. Which is not to say that we cannot learn to live with ambiguous loss, and even to thrive. But it is to say that we cannot do so by denying it, downplaying it, diminishing it. Importantly, she also insists that this kind of grief is not pathological. It is not the same as depression: a diagnosis requiring medical and therapeutic intervention. She says that most of the people she has studied and treated for ambiguous loss “are not depressed; they’re sad. They’re grieving.” This is a normal human process. And unlike mental illness, she argues, sadness has an imminently practical, free, universally accessible treatment: human connection.

To be a disciple of Jesus, a friend of Jesus, a follower of Jesus, to be in relationship with Jesus, to learn from him and turn toward him over the course of a complicated and at times dizzying life, is to live with a faith that is shaped, in part, by ambiguous loss. It is to embrace one who is physically absent but psychologically present – he’s not exactly here, but we are still in relationship, waiting for him to come back – and ascension gives us a moment, one Sunday in the Church year, to name that truth. To acknowledge that very real tension. To remember the God whose son really was incarnate among us – the word made flesh – and then ascended to heaven, eternally blessing us, showering us with love from the very heart of God, but who, therefore, no longer walks alongside us in quite the same way, no longer washes our feet or wipes our tears or offers us a hand with his own mortal body. Instead, God has left all of that to us, knowing that in order for us to grow into our own fully human, fully divine natures, we will need this time in the wilderness. We will need to wrestle with our loneliness and our grief. We will need to learn to connect with God and one another in new and different and deeply vulnerable ways. Surely Jesus could have forecast more of this for us, but like my celebrity friend, he knew there was nothing more he could tell us that would spare us the pain and the joy and the beauty of the path that lay ahead. We would have to make that road by walking.

Importantly, though, Jesus did not leave us without consolation: not only the promised Spirit but a direct, perfect, wholesome, universally accessible treatment for our longing for his fuller presence with us: human connection, which is made manifest mostly clearly in our life together around this table. Sunday after Sunday, week after week, season after season, we –
together – encounter our beloved friend and savior in the bread and wine made holy, as we –
together - take his whole self into our own bodies and with us out into the world, as we –
together – remember him, not only in our minds and our hearts but actually in the world living
the life he commended to us, proclaiming the great, good news of repentance and forgiveness to
all nations, to the very ends of the earth. Today, we observe the ascension, and we name the loss
in that, but we also celebrate the hope commended to us in this in-between place, which has the
power to re-member us all in God’s own image. Let it be so. Amen.