

Tracy Daub
5/28/17--University Presbyterian Church
Acts 1:6-14

LEFT BEHIND

The Gospel of Luke gives us a dramatic Hollywood ending to the account about the life of Jesus. It's a Hollywood movie makers dream. Luke ends his gospel with the image of all of Jesus' disciples gathered around him as the risen Jesus then rockets up into the sky, and disappears into the clouds. This story has come to be called the Ascension, and it appears in none of the other gospel accounts--only in Luke's gospel and in the second book Luke wrote, the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts begins where the gospel of Luke left off--with Jesus ascending up into the heavens. So Luke tells this story twice, and we heard the Acts' version of that story today.

Luke certainly gives us a vivid mental picture of Jesus' grand exit. It's one many of the world's great painters have tried to capture on canvas. But it's not Jesus that I think this story in the Book of Acts wants us to focus on. I think our attention is supposed to return to the disciples, standing there with their necks craned upward, their mouths hanging open. The Book of Acts is the account of what happens to those early *followers* of Jesus after he leaves them. It's the story of the early days of the Christian Church. And so, even though Jesus' spectacular lift-off takes center stage on this mental canvas in our heads, our eyes are supposed to be drawn downward to those little folks standing on the ground. Because, they are a lot like us.

I try to imagine what it must have felt like to have been left behind by Jesus. He was somebody who had brought so much meaning and purpose to the disciples' hard, hard lives. Even when they didn't understand him, they could feel something powerful in his presence, through his teachings, in his actions of healing and feeding. He made God real to them and

brought them hope. And they loved him. Life took on new meaning because of him. They certainly wouldn't have wanted him to leave them. But he did. And the disciples were left behind--left behind to deal with the cruelty of their Roman oppressors, left behind to still cope with their unrelenting poverty, left behind to face insecurity and persecution, illness and death.

We know what it feels like to be left behind. There are all kinds of ways we are left behind in this life: left behind by the spouse who walked out on you; left behind by one friend after another who keeps moving away to other states for work or school; left behind by the older sibling who got to go off and have adventures you weren't yet allowed to do; left behind by your husband or wife or partner who died, leaving you flattened by grief; left behind by the job market that no longer values your skills, or tells you that you are too old; left behind by an economic recovery that somehow missed you and your family; left behind by all your hopes and dreams that evaporated over the years like the sun dries up the morning dew. Maybe you too have a story of being left behind.

The Church does. It can feel as if we Christians have been left behind by a society that no longer respects us, values what we offer, or regards us as relevant. People have moved on to other things--like Starbucks and cross fit and Facetime and youth travel teams--and we in the Church feel left behind.

Maybe that is how those first disciples felt as they gazed up at Jesus leaving them. Jesus got raised from the dead alright--good for him--but all I got left with was this crappy world and life!

It feels hard to get left behind. At the very least, Jesus could have taken them with him. But he didn't. He didn't because he had something very special, very important for his followers to do. Just before Jesus rockets upward and out of sight, he tells his followers, "you will be my

witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." You will be my *witnesses*. It turns out that we got left behind for a purpose. And that purpose is that you and I are supposed to be witnesses for Jesus. We are called to witness to the world everything we know and have learned and have experienced about Jesus. This means that our lives are meant to be places where Jesus' love, grace, compassion, justice, generosity are displayed for all to see. And by that, I do not mean ordinary love, grace, compassion, generosity. Ordinary love is, "I'll love you as long as you love me or if I get something out of it." Ordinary compassion extends kindness and care only to those who don't make big mistakes. Ordinary generosity is calculated and measured. Ordinary forgiveness is limited to small infractions and only for a limited number of infractions. But Jesus demonstrated radical love, radical generosity, radical compassion, radical forgiveness. And he then turns to us and says, "be my witnesses."

We have been given a mission by Jesus. You and I as individuals, and all of us together as a Church, have a mission with our lives: to be Jesus' witnesses. The Church is not a memorial society for a dead Jesus. The Church is the body of Christ, alive, and called to action. Our purpose, individually and collectively, is to witness to Jesus' radical love, grace, compassion, and generosity.

Notice that Jesus tells us "you will be *my* witnesses." Despite the brand names we might wear on our T-shirts or hoodies, we are not witnesses for Nike or UB or Penn State. Despite the logos on our devices we are not witnesses for Apple or Samsung. Despite our love for our family we are not witnesses for the Daub family, the Smith family, the Wilson family. Despite our strong ties to our congregation, we are not witnesses for University Presbyterian Church. We are *Jesus'* witnesses. That is the purpose of our lives: to be Jesus' witnesses, in joy and in

sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health. Come what may, that is what our lives are to be about--witnessing to Jesus' radical, amazing love, compassion, grace, and generosity.

The world desperately needs this witness. Once again this week, our world was rocked by a terrorist's bomb. This attack, targeting children at a music concert in Manchester, England, was carried out by those who believed that bombing children was a valid way to bear witness to their idea of God. But we will not let the terrorists nor the politicians refocus our witness. We will not become witnesses to fear, to hate, to intolerance, because we are *Jesus'* witnesses.

We Christians ourselves have often gotten this witness so badly wrong down through the centuries. We have killed, we have hated, we have excluded, we have exploited, we have enslaved--all in perversion of the name of Christ. And just this week, we were given another example of how badly wrong the Christian witness to Jesus can become. Maybe you saw this story: about a teenage girl who attends a Christian high school. When it became known that the teenager was pregnant, the high school publically shamed her by making her proclaim her sin before the entire school, suspending her for breaking the morality code of conduct, and excluding her from participating in her high school graduation. And they claimed this was in the name of Christ. What kind of a horrific witness this sends to the world.

Jesus gives us a very different kind of witness--grounded in radical love, grace, compassion, and generosity. Jesus says to us: you will be my witnesses in Buffalo, in Amherst, in Tonawanda, in the United States and to the ends of the earth. Wherever you are, whatever you face in life, you are my witnesses. You have a purpose. You have mission.

Last Sunday, there was a big front page story in the Buffalo News about a large Guatemalan family living in the United States who feared deportation and who sought assistance through the local organization VIVE to get asylum in Canada. But VIVE, the local shelter

assisting refugees and asylum seekers, has experienced a huge volume of families in need in these recent months, and so they couldn't accommodate this family of 10 individuals. Instead, they reached out to a Buffalo family, Joelle and Mark Herskind, to see if they could shelter this Guatemalan family in their own home. And that's when I realized that I knew this Buffalo family. Joelle and I had gotten to know each other when I had done some volunteer work with Jericho Road. The Buffalo News story told of how Joelle and her husband not only took in the family of 10 but also said yes when they were asked if another family could also stay there, bringing the total number to 18 Guatemalans who took up residence in the Herskind's finished, spacious basement. The Herskind's stated that their decision to help these families was an expression of their Christian faith. They made a point not to ask too many questions of the families staying with them. "Legal or illegal, we don't know. We don't care," said Mark. Joelle added that "In the Scriptures, it says to care for the refugees, care for the orphans, care for the poor." VIVE also found space for other asylum seekers in a church's rectory and another two area churches opened their basements to families in need. I was thrilled with this story, not only because I knew some of the individuals involved but because it was a story out there in the mainstream media about Christians risking, sharing, giving, sacrificing, loving in the name of Christ. Jesus says to us, "You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth."

Do you know what happens when we become Jesus' witnesses? Witnessing to Jesus not only helps others, it transforms us. When we witness to Jesus, holiness seeps into our veins, our cells, our DNA. By "holiness" I don't mean "self-righteousness." Holiness is different than self-righteousness. Holiness is that which is filled with the presence of God. Jesus gives us the gift of being filled with God's holy presence. Despite whatever we may face in life, whatever pain,

hardship, or struggle we may experience, our lives are filled with holiness whenever we witness to Jesus. For this, we have been left behind.