

Ascension Sunday 2014

Saint Thomas Episcopal Church, Denver
The Reverend Ruth Woodliff-Stanley
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Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

When our son George was born, my sister Ann was in the birthing suite. Soon after he came out of my womb, she touched his feet. I've never forgotten what she said. In an almost whisper, she reported, "his feet are so soft. They are like butter."

Now, eighteen years later, sometimes I look at those feet. They are big and gangly. And so beautiful to me. Mothers do weird things, you know, like walking into their grown child's room just to catch a glimpse of his feet while he is sleeping. I did this recently, I confess.

Salvador Dali decided to paint the Ascension from the point of view of the disciples beneath him who were watching. So, it is a painting of Jesus' feet. This is what they would have seen as he ascended. This would have been their last image. His feet. Other artists, too, have shown his feet dangling from the clouds.

This angle on the Ascension helps me embrace this odd feast day. It's one of the feasts of the church that reminds me each year that I am not a literalist. If you're like me, the whole idea of Jesus floating off into the clouds like Glinda the Good Witch leaving the munchkins in the Wizard of Oz as Ann Fontaine noted, leaves me, well, if not cold, at least cool.

Until, that is, I consider that perhaps the story is about something other than Jesus rocketing off above the clouds to a celestial space station where he could, potentially, be discovered today by one of the rockets our son George's genius friend Carter now launches with a crackerjack team of young rocket engineers at USC.

The story, which the Church has placed in this season of graduations and farewells at the juncture between the spring and summer of the year, speaks to a certain kind of letting go that Jesus' friends had to do in order to embrace their next calling beyond the chapter of their lives when they'd walked with Jesus in his ministry.

While the Holy Week/Easter narrative speaks to us about loss and new life, this story speaks to us not about loss but about letting go in order to be able to embrace what's next.

In the time between the resurrection and the ascension, Jesus' followers had a reprieve. A new season with him. The feast of the Ascension is not a replay of the

drama of loss, of the fear of death. Rather, it speaks to a different challenge, namely, the challenge of *freely* loosening their grip on him.

While the crucifixion ripped him from them and hurled them into a kind of grief and despair, this moment is not that. It is, rather, the moment of saying, “okay, much as I want to hold on, I will not. You must go, and I must stay.”

That’s why it is good to have this story now, in our season of transitions, when people are graduating and preparing to leave home.

I don’t know about you, but I’m not very good at letting go. In fact, I’d say I’m horrible at it. I want to hold on. I can talk the talk, but I can’t easily walk the walk. Many of you know this summer will end with my turn to let go of our soon-to-be-college George. I won’t lie to you; I’m dreading it.

When our boys were little, and we would leave them with a baby sitter for a few hours, our son John developed the skillful practice of grabbing my feet and holding on. I guess he figured it was his best means of stopping the departure. And it did slow me down. But, ultimately, of course, he had to let go.

That’s why I love this image of Jesus’ feet in the Ascension. They are the last part of him his friends would have been tempted to grab hold of.

Don’t we all know that impulse too well? If only we could grab hold of whomever we do not want to let go of and drag them, feet first, back to us, then everything would be alright.

Don’t let time pass. Don’t let things change. Don’t let the people who are my world depart from me. Don’t let this change come.

These are the longings that tear at us in moments of letting go.

The story of Jesus’ ascension is built upon another ascension story, that of Elijah. In that story, it was Elisha who was left behind. And he was no different from us. He couldn’t stand the thought of letting go of Elijah. He hated it so much that when people told him it was about to happen, he simply replied, “Yes, I know. Keep silent!” In other words, “*shut up!*”

Just before Elijah left, he asked what he could do for Elisha. Elisha asked for a double portion of the Spirit that had guided his master. Elijah told him, if you see me ascend, you shall receive your wish. And so it happened that Elisha watched and saw Elijah swept up in a fiery chariot. And then, after Elijah had left him, he took up the

mantle that had fallen from Elijah, placed it upon himself, received the Spirit, and began to work his own miracles.

The Ascension is our letting go story. But not letting-go-just –for-the-sake-of-letting-go. No, it is our letting go-in-order- to-take-up-our-mantle story.

We cannot grow, we cannot become who God needs us to be if we are unwilling to practice the hard and frightening discipline of letting go.

As long as we are grabbing on, like the toddler John gripping my feet, we cannot discover our own potential. There comes a moment in each relationship, in each chapter of our lives, when it is time to let go and watch the beautiful feet of another rise into the clouds.

And like Elisha, we will find our richest blessing comes when we have the courage not to turn away and deny the departure but to embrace it as necessary, good even.

And in the moment after letting go, it is time for us to pick up *our* mantle and wait for the Spirit to guide us.

And so as we celebrate this odd feast of the Church, I invite you to consider your own discipline of letting go. Whom do you fear losing? Whose feet are you grabbing at the door to prevent a departure you imagine you cannot endure? And what growth might your fears be preventing in them and in your own life?

There are always beautiful feet that come into our lives. Soft like butter. We whisper promises to never let them go. And for a season, those are the right promises to make.

But then the moment comes when we must stand with Elisha and with Jesus' disciples and look up with eyes of faith, as those beautiful feet ascend. Because what happens next in our own story depends upon our seeing that moment with our own eyes and saying YES to it with every fiber of our being.

Let us help one another say that YES. Let us watch those beautiful feet ascend, when our moments come. And then, with courage and hope, let us find the mantle that fell from them, take it upon ourselves, and face into our own calling with courage and grace.

Blessed Feast of the Ascension to you all.