

I Will Never Leave You

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Ascension Sunday), Year A – Acts 1:6-14

preached at St. Paul's, Henderson, June 1, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!*The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

As you know, I've had occasion lately to think a lot about my family. And, as mentioned last week, I've been more focused than usual on one specific event.

My dad died when I was in college. At almost 42, he was playing basketball with the junior high school kids he taught history and science. He went in for a lay-up, sank the basket, and collapsed on the court. The paramedics from the fire house down the road got to the school in five minutes, but he was gone. His second heart attack was too much for him.

Most of a continent away, I returned from my morning classes to find a note taped to my dorm room door. "Call your mom at home," it said. Mom was also a teacher and was *never* at home during the day, so I knew those five words meant much more. I finally got through during a break in chemistry lab that afternoon. Mom was in her "get everything taken care of" mode as we talked about all the plans for the next few days. And being my mother's son, I shifted into the same mode as soon as we hung up. As the oldest, any of the details that Mom could not, or *preferred* not to handle, fell to me.

A friend came and picked me up for the long drive to Ohio, where my father had grown up and where he was to be buried. The funeral was in the tradition of the rural, conservative church in which I was raised, and in which Dad had been a minister. There was an open casket. There was an endless stream of relatives and friends, many of whom I had never seen in my life. There was praying, and there was singing, and there were white hankies waving in the air with the sound of women weeping. When it was finished, the deacons of the church gathered around my mother as the casket was borne out of the church. We were escorted to a limousine where we waited for everyone else to get to their funeral-flagged cars. Then the hearse in front of us moved forward, starting the procession through the Ohio countryside, out to the cemetery where my father's family were all buried. The hearse bearing my father's body pulled away from us – and it hit me. My father was *gone*.

That *January* Dad had had his first heart attack. For the first couple of days we thought he might not make it. But then he bounced back, and we were overjoyed. I spent most of my Christmas break that year talking to my father in his hospital bed. I probably learned more from my father, and more *about* my father, in that short time than in all our years together. That summer was like that, too. I joined the family in Ohio, where Dad had a summer job, inspecting hybrid corn crops. He didn't accept many invitations to preach that summer. Instead, he spent extra time with *us*. He and I ate and laughed and talked together in a way that we hadn't before. He talked about all the plans *he* had as a young man. He talked about religion and science and fishing and philosophy. He talked about the fact that he wouldn't be there forever. And I soaked it all in, thankful that my dad was still here to tell me all these things. When he dropped me off for work the morning the family returned to Arizona, we kissed – something we had just begun doing again that year – and he told me, "You're going to be okay."

And then with the November cold numbness on top of numbness, the hearse pulled my father from me. As it was momentarily swallowed up by a cloud of exhaust fumes and condensation, I wanted to shout, "Don't go!"

I knew that the rest of my family were crammed into the back of the limo, but in that moment I felt abandoned. I knew that I had had an extra year to be with my father, but in that moment I felt betrayed. As with any other nineteen-year-old, I suspect, I was convinced that I knew almost everything that was worth knowing, but in that moment I felt utterly helpless.

On a hillside just outside Jerusalem forty days after Jesus was raised from the dead, the disciples watched as he was raised up into the clouds. In forty days they had just gotten used to the idea that he was *with* them again. They had thought he was gone. But he was back! And for five and a half weeks he had, in the words of this morning's passage from Acts, "presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs." They had eaten together, they had laughed together, and they had talked together in a way that they hadn't before. Jesus talked about life in the kingdom of God. He talked about fishing for people. And over and over and over, he reminded them that he would not be there forever.

Now with Spring turning into Summer, the twelve minus one, watched as their master was lifted higher and higher, until their view of him was obliterated by the clouds. No doubt, they wanted to shout, "Don't go!" But they stood and watched as he was taken farther and farther from them. Watched until he was gone for good. Watched until the only thing to see was cloud and sky. The disciples stood there and watched, until two men in white mysteriously appeared among them and told them to go home. Too tired to think anymore, and too numb to *do* any more, they turned back toward Jerusalem. With their heads down, their feet shuffled along the short distance home. Perhaps they felt abandoned. Perhaps they felt betrayed. I don't know how else they could have felt but helpless.

When they got back to the city, they went back to the upper room and shut the door. The same room where they had eaten the Passover, shared the bread and the wine, the night before their master was crucified. The same room where the next day they hid in the dark. The same room where the risen Christ had found them covered behind a locked door on the third day. They went back to the upper room, they locked the door, and in their abandonment, their betrayal, and their helplessness – they did the only thing they could do: They prayed. They had no wise teacher. They had no impassioned preacher. They had no faithful friend. They had not yet received the power of fire, the comforter, the guide. It was ten days when the disciples, the Church, the message of Christ *itself*, hung by a thread. No Lord and no Spirit. Only gathered prayer. And one thing more – a promise.

It took me weeks after my father's funeral to remember it. During those weeks was the only time in my life when I considered that maybe my life itself wasn't worthwhile. But I *did* remember my Dad's promise, "You're going to be okay." The disciples gathered and they prayed, and they *remembered* the promise that Jesus had given them. They remembered that with the same breath with which he had told them that he would not be with them forever, he had promised, "I will be with you *always*." With that same breath he had promised never, *never* to leave them alone.

Here and now, today, we are asked by the story of Scripture and by the traditions of the Church year to live into the ten days between Christ's ascension through the clouds and the coming of the fire of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This week in preparation for that fiery feast that we celebrate next week, let us remember the in-between-time. Let us remember that promise that sustained his followers and sustains *us* still, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." As helpless and abandoned as it may sometimes seem to be, there is a promise. "I will *never* leave you or forsake you." Let us pray that that promise will become for us a strength and a depth. Let us pray with fire and with passion that that promise will be fulfilled in our *own* day, as it was at the birth of the Church.

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