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May

## Living the Sequel

Stories That Matter

ASCENSION OF THE LORD, YEAR A

Ascension marks the completion of Christ’s work and the beginning of ours. This service frames worship as blessing—receiving Christ’s promise and responding with praise and mission.

### REFERENCES

Daniel 7:9-14

Psalm 24:7-10

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

### COLORS

White

Some years ago, I was part of a small group that decided to study a wonderful book by Barbara Brown Taylor, titled *An Altar in the World*. It was a book about paying attention to the world around us, about recognizing that God was present in the most unlikely situations, in small things and big ones too. Taylor took a spiritual disciplines approach, and each chapter was titled “The Practice of ...” and included such items “Waking up to God,” “Wearing Skin,” “Saying No,” “Feeling Pain,” and many more. Things that most of us don’t consider spiritual practices suddenly were doorways into the experience of the presence of God.

We finished the book with the last chapter, “The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings.” It was a great way to end the study and the book, with a benediction. I was surprised during that church’s Followership Retreat (that’s what we called it, instead of a Leadership Retreat) when someone said

they liked the benedictions. There was a feeling of being gathered up and sent off, made complete by the word that provided an *amen* to the hymn that is worship week by week.

A blessing, on the one hand, is a casual comment recognizing the presence of another. Sneeze in public, and a total stranger will bless you. Spending time around Southerners blessing someone is a way of empathizing, even when the person being blessed isn't present. Tell of a difficult time in someone's life, and you will get a heartfelt, "Bless their heart" when you are in the South.

Blessings are prayers of support as well. Even "goodbye" is shorthand for "God be with you." We invoke that presence when we wish one another well, when we part from those we know and love. And when that parting is going to be for a long time, the words almost choke in our throats, not because we are reluctant to confer the blessing, but because we know that our words are inadequate to convey such power and presence and hope. And for a moment, we wish we had a better way of blessing those we love.

One wonders about the tone in Jesus' voice as he conveyed yet another blessing on those he called and now will leave behind. It is Ascension Sunday this week, when Jesus said his goodbyes and was taken up to his place alongside the Father in heaven. We're reading Luke's version—or his first version, because he retells the story in part two, the Acts of the Apostles. But this is the ending of the Gospel bearing Luke's name.

"While he was blessing them." It sounds like something he was used to doing, a habit, a way of being. There are some people who are like that. When you are with them, you feel like you are being blessed. Even if there are no formal words to that effect, no pronouncement or prayer, just being with them feels like God is smiling on you. Maybe that is what was remembered here.

They were talking together about a lot of things. Jesus wanted them to finally understand. They spent most of his earthly ministry with their mouths hanging open and scratching their heads. The most common response to most of Jesus' teaching, even from those closest to him, had to have been "Huh?"

But the waiting had to be over. So, he taught them —about himself. He told them plainly. He looked back at everything that was written about him, and he pointed it out with painstaking detail. Luke says, "He opened their minds." For some of them, it took a crowbar or the mental equivalent. Maybe it was mystical powers, maybe it was divine patience, maybe it was drawing pictures, or maybe it was the ability to move them beyond themselves long enough to see something significant in front of them. It is curious that Luke messes up the Greek in this passage. We cleaned

it up for him in translation, but what he wrote was that Jesus opened their mind, not their minds. I know, the grammar instructor would have pointed out the need for the plural word there, to match the plural object – *they, their* needs *minds*, so we supplied it.

But what if it wasn't an accident? What if he meant it? What if part of what Jesus showed them was that they needed one another to figure this stuff out? He was telling them that on their own, they would be hopelessly inadequate for the task of understanding, but that together – one heart and one mind – they just might make it. Maybe a part of what he opened in them was the recognition of how much they needed one another.

Then he gave them a task: to be witnesses to the world, proclaimers of repentance – getting people back on track—and forgiveness of sins – doing it without judgment or division, but with love and compassion. And then because that would be beyond the capabilities of all of them – and all of us – he promised them help. In fact, he gave them a task and then told them to wait until they received the help they needed to do that task, until they were clothed with power. That means that this power would not come from within; it wasn't something they could generate for themselves. It had to be given; it had an outside origin. It was like a blessing. While he was blessing them, he withdrew and was carried up. It was as if the task of blessing was incomplete, at least for now. There was more to come, more that they needed, a further blessing.

I mentioned that my small group finished the study, but I should have pointed out that they finished it without me. I missed the final session because I was with my brother and sister while we cared for our mom and dad. It had been a difficult time with far too many unanswered questions. Mom had a particularly bad day and told my sister that she wasn't sure how much longer she could do this. "This" was rehab from a broken hip and the struggles with her mind about who she is and who she was, and all the worries about what might be next. Early Alzheimer's was beginning to take its toll. After many tears and few words, my sister and my mom sat in the darkening room and held hands, while my dad expressed his grief by going for a walk.

Alerted by my sister, I arrived a little later and came and sat with Mom, while she and Dad went out for some air. By the time I got there, the tears were gone and, instead, there was peace. She smiled as she took my hand and said, "I love you" about a hundred times in the hour or so we sat together, interspersed with "I am so proud of you." I told her that it was her love that made me who I am, and that I couldn't be prouder to have her as my mother. And then, out of nowhere it seemed, she said, "I'll always be there. Right behind you."

It sounded like goodbye —a least to us, and it broke our hearts. But maybe we were wrong. Maybe it was a blessing, not an ending, not a parting, but something new. Physically, she is improving and could be with us a lot longer. Who knows? Something was changing, slipping away into something new, and we didn't quite know how to handle it. She didn't, and we didn't. But as I held her hand in that room that seemed to close in on us, she began to glow. It was as if her love for me became visible for a moment. And I pray that mine for her was just as evident. It was a benediction, a good word in the silence of that moment, and in that love, we were both clothed with power.

*Rev. Dr. Derek Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries, served churches in Indiana, Arkansas, and the British Methodist Church. His PhD in preaching and media is from the University of Edinburgh. He has taught preaching in seminary and conference settings for more than twenty years.*

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