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Acts 1:6-14

There's a story about Jesus that I really like. It seems that Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at God's right hand. As he appeared, the angel Gabriel saw that Jesus' body bore the scars of his crucifixion. "It must have been really hard for you, Jesus - it must have hurt terribly," said Gabriel. "Yes, it did." "So what happens now," asked Gabriel. "Well, I left Peter, James, John, Mary, and the others in charge of the message," responded Jesus. "My, that's a heavy burden you've left them - all that message about peace and loving the enemy and caring for the sick and the poor. What if they get tired?" "Well, they might," murmured Jesus. "Well, I assume you've got a back-up plan," said Gabriel. "Nope, no back-up. It's up to them now."

So Jesus has left us to do his work.

It remains for us to go *into the whole world and proclaim the good news to all creation*. It is our task to relieve suffering, to end war, to remove ignorance, to heal wounds, to eliminate divisions, to promote understanding, to spread love, to do justice. We must tackle the problems of the world, and Jesus has stepped aside, so to speak, so as not to get in our way.

In another version of the ascension Jesus asks, "*Why do you stand here looking up at the skies? Get busy! There is work to do!*"

With nothing but a promise and a prayer, those eleven disciples consented to BE the church, and nothing was ever the same again, beginning with them. The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the converts became missionaries, the healed became healers, and the disciples became apostles, witnesses to the Risen Christ... and so, they stopped looking up toward heaven, and looked at each other instead. And then, they got on with the business of being the church.

You see, they became, and we are, the hands of Christ in a troubled and broken world. That's no easy thing to be.

This scene in Acts doesn't get enough attention. The ascension of Jesus into heaven is not accomplished as a huge spectacle - no thunder or lightning or parting of the clouds. No, The ascension receives only a brief sentence in this account. It is no more than a quiet exit with a prayer of blessing and the promise of the Holy Spirit.

And that is important.

The soft and swift departure of Jesus must have left them a bit breathless – but with Jesus' blessing, they knew they were not alone.

And we know, in our best moments, that *we* are not alone.

The ascension of Jesus Christ doesn't mean that Jesus has *left* us so much as that he's departed somewhere while leaving his message behind. And the message is the assurance that he is always, always with us.

I have an image of Jesus sitting behind a gauzy curtain. It ripples slightly in a breeze. Jesus the observer, Jesus the friend, here and not here, within us and without us, filling our hearts and our lives when we let it happen. Encouraging us, pushing us with the most gentle of whispers, never leaving our sides.

We have all seen the initials WWJD – What Would Jesus Do. Well, for one thing, Jesus would work to eliminate poverty. For another, Jesus would work for reconciliation of age-old enemies. Jesus would probably scoff at our petty doctrinal differences in the church and say, "Those things aren't important. Poverty is important. Starving children are important. The proper stewardship of all creation is important. Serving justice is important. Set the other things aside – they are a distraction. They're not essentials. Loving is what is essential."

That's what Jesus would do in my humble opinion.

In the Gospel of Luke which tells of the Ascension, it is written that Jesus lifted up his hands and blessed the disciples. We bless many things. We bless infants and adults at baptism. We bless the bread and wine of Holy Eucharist. We bless animals as our steadfast companions. We bless couples on the day of their vows. We bless God for God's great gifts. And heck, two years ago I blessed a fire truck!

But Jesus blesses *us*. When he ascended, he left us with his promise. Granted – we are not the eleven, but we are certainly the disciples, the apostles, the bearers of the Good News of God's mercy! And if we are to live up to Jesus' charge to us, we will spread that Good News wherever we go.

And it's all based on a miracle.

There's a story about a church pageant... It seems that the highlight of the pageant every year would be that the actor playing Christ was to be slowly hoisted out of

view through an opening in the ceiling. "Lo, I am with you always," he said, signaling for the ascension to begin. "Even unto the end of the world."

The flight upward was progressing smoothly, until the stage crew briefly lost grip of the rope and the actor nearly dropped back to the stage. With enviable stage presence, he remained in character as his feet dangled inches from the floor and his bewildered disciples looked on in horror.

"Oh, and one more thing," he said calmly. "Love one another."

Immediately, the rope yanked him up into the ceiling hole and out of sight.

That's the miracle. The miracle of God's redeeming love.

Sure, the Gospels are full of miracles – the miracle of Jesus' birth to a young peasant woman. The miracle of the feeding of five thousand with a few fish and a few loaves of bread. The miracle of healing Lazarus, raising him from the dead. The ultimate miracle of the resurrection. And the miracle, as the author of Acts reports it, of the ascension into heaven to sit at God's right hand.

But the truly miraculous message is that God loves us.

The truly miraculous message is that God is crazy about us!!

The truly miraculous message is that no matter how badly we mess up our lives and the lives of other people, God forgives us, loves us, cherishes us, wants the best for us – and God will never give up. Never.

There's a story I'd like to close with, written by James Dickey. Dickey was born in Atlanta, Georgia. He served as a pilot in World War Two, attended Vanderbilt University, returned to military duty in the Korean War, serving with the US Air Force. After the publication of his first book, *Into the Stone* in 1962, he left an advertising career and began teaching at various colleges and universities. He became poet-in-residence and Carolina Professor of English at the University of South Carolina. His war experiences and the death of his brother both inform his poetry, and this short piece is poetic yet prose. It sums up, for me, the miracle of the Ascension.

"Very gently He touched my neck, and felt the blood throb there. In that touch there was infinite love, and no question. He looked upward toward blueness, across which a cloud was beginning. I tried to hold Him in my arms, but somehow knew this was not the time to restrain Him.

He lifted away from me easily.

I held His warm, humanly-pulsing ankle in my hand as He went slowly upward.  
He entered the cloud.

He was gone from us, and never gone. Never.”

That’s it... gone but never gone. Loving without ceasing. Absent yet present.  
Always, always with us. Always, always forgiving. Always, always full of  
mercy.

The love of Jesus Christ did not depart with him. Although he may have left this  
earthly realm, his love remains. Here. In our hearts. The love of Jesus Christ  
helps us overcome all odds, sustains us in the wilderness of our lives.

And he is with us always. Until the end of time.

We need to remember that.

Amen.