

“A Transitional Moment”
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How old were you in 1982? I was three years old. In 1982, a truck driver by the name of Larry Walters was 33. One day Larry was sitting in his lawn chair in his backyard wishing he could fly. For as long as he could remember he had wanted to fly but he had never had the time or money or opportunity to be a pilot. He thought about hang gliding, but there was no good place for gliding near his home.

So instead, Larry Walters spent many summer afternoons daydreaming in his ordinary old aluminum chair – you know the kind: not the fancy, cushioned camping and outdoor chairs that you can purchase now, but the kind that were ubiquitous back in the 70s and 80s, with the plastic webbing and the cheap rivets. Maybe they’d be considered vintage now.

One day in 1982, Larry decided to make his dreams a reality. So, with the help a half dozen friends, he hooked 45 helium-filled surplus weather balloons to his aluminum chair, put a CB radio in his lap, tied a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, and slung a BB-gun over his shoulder to pop the balloons when he wanted to come down.

He expected to climb, oh maybe a couple of hundred feet over his neighborhood... that would have been enough of a thrill for him. But instead, he shot up 16,000 feet right through the approach corridor to the Los Angeles International Airport, disrupting flight patterns and attracting global attention.

Later, after his joy ride was over, when asked by the press why he did it, Larry had a simple answer: "Well, you can't just sit there." When asked if he was scared, he answered, "Yes...wonderfully so."

If you are thinking I told this story to help us relate the awe, wonder, joy and terror that must have been coursing through the veins of Jesus’ disciples and Larry’s friends, as they watched, respectively, Jesus, and Larry, ascend into the heavens, you’re wrong. While today’s lectionary text is the reason this Sunday is celebrated as Ascension Day, the import of Jesus’ Ascension has literally nothing to do with Jesus’ vertical locomotion towards the heavens, like Larry Walters, minus the aid of helium filled balloons. There is something far more significant and wonderfully scary about this text.

So, let’s be clear about a few things. First, Luke’s gospel is the only gospel that gives us an Ascension story. Matthew and John make minor allusions to it, but Mark skips it entirely. Second, of the ten verses Luke gives to telling the story, there is only half a verse that refers to Jesus’ heavenward movement. Yes, Jesus departs from his disciples, but this occurs more in passing, without even breaking the flow of the story. Really, if we weren’t looking for it, we might gloss right over the little phrase: “was carried up into heaven.”

You see, Ascension Day is much less about the physical act of ascension and much more about the divine will of God to make time and space for us. The story of the Ascension is the story of a great transitional moment where we are invited to take a lead part in the story of God. The story of Jesus' ascension is the story of a pivotal moment: one when a great transition is made from Jesus' resurrection to his ascension and then, most significantly, to the church's mission in the world.

Sadly, the ascension of the Risen Christ has been spiritualized over the centuries by many Christian traditions. Throughout much of the history of the Western Church, the Risen, Jewish Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified by the Roman Empire, came to be portrayed as if he was some kind of "celestial monarch," ruling with kingly, patriarchal authority over all. Such a distorted picture misses the profound reality: that the human life of the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth has not only been raised by God but, with the Ascension, given a place within the Godhead. Moreover, as the risen and ascended Jesus has his life within the divine life of the Trinity, the Ascension is also when he gets out of the spotlight, out of the limelight, so that a real place can be made for us. We, who are called the body of Christ, the church, are those whose existence springs to life only as we are called out to be witnesses in the world. And the Ascension makes a place for our new existence.

The point of Jesus' Ascension is not that we look up to heaven with sadness, wondering why God would create such distance between Godself and the world, as if there was only so much time and attention a divine monarch could give to his subjects before needing to return to the throne. Not at all! Rather, the Ascension shows the divine life of God to be humble, patient, and self-effacing. Just as God, with great humility, became one of us in the incarnation, so now also in the Ascension, God seeks not to gain pride of place or assert hierarchical dominion over the others but instead gives time and space for others to be most fully who they are. God wants to make space for us. We are called for such a time as this.

The Ascension of Jesus signals that the place-giving work of the triune God has now made time and space for the mission of the church. So long as God was in the world, incarnate in the person of the Risen Jesus, all eyes and hearts would be fixed there. But in the transitional moment of the Ascension, in this moment of fear and trembling, uncertainty and perplexity, the disciples are given time and space to turn their gaze upon the world, where "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations."

Like the followers of Jesus, after the resurrection, Westminster is also in a time of great transition. All churches are simply because of the way the pandemic has rapidly increased the rate of change we are experiencing in the society. But Westminster has, perhaps, an extra dose of transition right now. I've only recently arrived as your new pastor. Since I've started, we have three new support staff. We have new opportunities to get up to date with technology, we will soon begin to live-streaming, and create even more opportunities for hybrid church as a way to better connect with the community. We have experienced new initiatives with RIP Medical Debt, learning and discussions on racism, new worship

experiences in Advent, Lent, and Easter and new routines for safety for our in-person activities.

This is a lot of change, a lot of transition, and for some, it has been rather scary, disruptive, and unsettling. We have not gone back to church the way it used to be. Like Larry Walters, we have decided we cannot simply sit around and do nothing. We have embraced the wonderfully scary reality of church in unsettling and rapidly changing times. And so, in this moment of transition, which we will continue to be in for some time, I want us to hear and receive this good news. When Jesus was ready to ascend, when he was ready to make space for the church, when the triune God gave power, time, and space for the witness and mission of the church, in this scary moment of transition, Jesus had only one focus for his followers: to bless and bless them again.

You see, it was not that Jesus was abandoning them by ascending. Rather, Jesus was blessing them for fruitful mission and exciting new engagement. And that is what Jesus wants to do for us right now, as we too we find ourselves in this transitional moment.

As we continue to move forward, amidst great uncertainty but committed nevertheless to faithfully loving our neighbor as ourselves, let us allow Jesus to bless us. God has made time and space for the church to join God in bringing God's way on earth as it is in heaven. And Jesus wants to bless as we move forward into our calling. May we receive this blessing. And like the followers back then, may we worship Jesus and go forward in great joy, blessing God by stepping into the time and space God has made for us. Amen!