

Bethany features with some frequency in the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Bethany is the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, and it seems to have been Jesus' "home base" when he visited Jerusalem.

In fact, for someone who engaged in a sort of "programmed homelessness", it's as close to a home as he got!

Bethany is the scene of the story of the raising of Lazarus, of the anointing of Jesus with expensive perfumed oil, of the different perspectives on faithful response of Martha and Mary and – finally, of the story of Jesus' ascension.

Bethany, in other words, is a good place to say "goodbye" to Jesus. It's a good place because Bethany was always about good things – relationship, bonds of affection closer than family, the inclusion of a diverse group in the inner circles of a new community predicated on that relationship, that companionship, that love.

The questioning of the Lakeside ministry in the Galilee, the confrontations and violence of Jerusalem during the Passover – those were, ultimately, the wrong places to say "goodbye"

That's why, for Luke, the story of the Ascension couldn't have happened anywhere else – not in Bethlehem, not in Nazareth, not in Jerusalem, only in Bethany, only in that place of unambiguous love would such a moment be appropriate and understandable.

It's a story of parting and promise, and of a transformation of reality for those closest to Jesus – his friends.

Through Luke's story we come to the same realization as this diverse group of people – the Eleven, Martha, Mary, Lazarus, Mary Magdalene – that they were going to have to get along with out Jesus.

That in-breaking reality of "getting along without" – without the central person in their lives must have been deeply disorienting – certainly they all must have had a sense of apprehension.

We surely can identify with that feeling – with earthquakes and tsunamis, with war everywhere we turn, it can feel like we're living in a world where God appears to have withdrawn and left us to it; abandoned us to our fate. And most of us have experienced the loss of someone we love – grandparents, parents, sometimes even children, friends. We know that loss.

As I read it, that's what's going on at the end of the Acts passage. The message in the moment is clearly this: "Well, now what do we do?"

The answer comes in the appearance of two messengers who wonder somewhat pointedly: "why do you stand here looking into heaven?" You knew this moment was coming. We know moments like this are coming.

The messengers go further: “Remember,” they say. Enshrined in their words to the disciples that day is a charge that lies at the heart of our faith: Remember what Jesus said; that our work will continue, our cause will endure, and our hope will live on, if we live in God’s grace and love.

“Jesus hasn’t just gone away”, was their message. Rather, he’s gone deeper into the heart of reality – our reality and God’s.

So this montage that Luke paints is not the beginning of the end for this fascinating and diverse group of friends, but the end of the beginning; a transition moment - the hinge between “Jesus with us” and “Jesus in us.” It is toward that second experience that the passage invites us to re-orient ourselves – but the transition (for this odd little group) is already underway, the words just beyond the end of today’s Acts reading; Luke reports that they “returned to Jerusalem rejoicing”

Each year we make this same journey. We journey in the darkening days to the moment we celebrate a birth; we journey in the lengthening days to the foot of a cross and to an empty tomb; and that journey brings us to this place and moment of transition which is also a moment of preparation.

We, this day, are at a moment of transition, and we, this week, will make preparations for a day that marks the birth of something new for us as it did for disciples – the Day of Pentecost and the dedication of our new building. It’s okay to feel a little apprehension about the future – it will be different than the present and the past. We are entering a new time and new things will be asked of us.

The invitation of this day for us is to march off to our own Jerusalem in good spirits, knowing that we have the most important things: each other’s companionship for the next part of the journey, and the promise of God’s Spirit to support and guide us as we go.

May the Day be one of celebration and of joy, and may we recognize it as the end of the beginning, a new moment in our common life here on South Whidbey.

Amen.