

The Sunday after the Ascension, May 28, 2017 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

Jesus is leaving - going to that place that is at the heart of God – in the language of metaphor he has ascended. Today is the 'hinge' moment between the Luke's Gospel and his "Acts of the Apostles," companion volumes about, First, the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and, second, the spread of the community that Jesus birthed: the Early Church.

And a central question in this moment is one that still carries freight for us: how did the disciples respond to Jesus' departure?

Luke's gospel says "unmitigated joy." Luke's "Acts" adds a gentle reproof about "gazing up into heaven," with the implication that there's work to be done, but neither is there a hint of sorrow here either, only joy.

I wonder, how real is that likelihood? We have the luxury of hindsight, so we know what follows in only a week – Pentecost. That reality for us was just a possibility for the disciples.

As they head back to Jerusalem, they had a choice in this moment. With Jesus' departure – he's gone; he just said so then disappeared – they could have packed their metaphorical bags, headed home and resumed their old lives as if, in the end, nothing had changed. The joy of knowing that the final word wasn't a bloody cross and a hasty, permanent burial could – in the absence of a firm intentionality – have morphed into a warm, increasingly fuzzy remembrance of some "good old days" which ended when Jesus had, like an old Hollywood Western, "ridden off into the sunset."

How easy it would have been for them to have seen their time with Jesus as a brief moment when exciting possibility seemed to overcome the ordinary, mundane, dangerous realities of 1st Century life under the harsh oppression of an occupied land.

In the end, even the 'warm fuzzies' would have faded, as reality reimposed itself, as that moment of possibility turned out to be only that: a moment; and the moment had passed, and the first part of the story of two disciples journeying away from Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus, dejected and sorrowful, would have told the whole tale.

The events in Manchester, England last week were not unlike that part of the Emmaus story: deep, deep sorrow and no joy around the departed, not yet even the warm glow of a happily-remembered past. That moment – 10:33 p.m. British Summer Time/ 2:33 p.m. Pacific Daylight Time – was a crucifixion moment – cruel, inhuman, barbaric, made worse by the heartless violence and unexpected nature of the loss. Not just 22 lives extinguished, not just 22 families forever scarred, but also more than fifty individuals and families living with the physical and emotional scars of that night – the damaged bodies, lost limbs. And, finally, all the others who mercifully escaped physical harm, but who will now be living with PTSD as a result.

Death and destruction most obviously haunt our world at the moment – a haunting made more

real and present to all of us because contemporary modes of communication bring these events into our living-rooms, onto our smart-phones, 24-hours-a-day-7-days-a-week-365-days-a-year. Violence and death seem, because of this, to be much worse than ever before, and also much more personal; and so the fear that haunts us is also much more real, much more personal.

But has it ever been different? It's indisputable that human beings using extreme violence as a means to an end has been a base marker of human identity. It seems that the human propensity to kill – and the killing – has increased along with the human ability to do so. “Restraint” is a word that only seems applicable when naked self-interest intervenes, and not always then. How many hundreds of millions of human beings have been murdered over the course of human history?

The use of indiscriminate violence and murder for political ends by creating a fear disproportionate to the number of casualties – terrorism – is relatively new in human history. The word itself only appears in the 1970's. That's because it really only works when you pair it with those modern communications that bring it into our living rooms and onto our smart phones. I suspect that – sadly – had those methods of communication been available earlier in human history, terrorism would have appeared earlier, too. When paired with a sense of grievance, and a loss of shared values, it's a volatile mixture.

The Question that human history asks us – one raised again by the events in Manchester – is this one: is violence really the primary defining characteristic of human identity, or are we exemplified also or more significantly, or even instead by some other expression of the human soul and spirit?

If it's the former – that the primary defining characteristic of human identity is – and always has been – violence – then there's a second, more personal question: are we, as people of faith, wasting our time professing peace as one of – if not our primary – core values, and following the one who by his life, death and resurrection, most obviously proclaimed it? The answer to the first question will give us the answer the second.

If you believe that might makes right, that violence is always the first resort because strength is the only language that all human beings recognize, then the human ability to love will appear fragile and valueless. Yet again and again we humans have proven able to overcome – to rise above – the seductive call of violence, even in the face of war and death....perhaps *especially* in the face of war and death.

The history of humanity – written not only in indelible words but also in remembered actions – speaks not only of the seeming permanence of violence and war but also its counter: the enduring supremacy of love as the true foundation of all human community; the overarching ability of human beings to rise above the base, savage actions of brutality and barbarism and reach out to one another in love. That's what Jesus lived for; that's what Jesus died for. And his resurrection, our faith loudly proclaims is not only the vindication of that proactive commitment, it is also a proclamation of the dignity and worth of a human existence that's predicated on the centrality of the positive virtues of love, and joy, and peace.

In that, I believe, the Ascension make sense. Not as a ‘stand-alone’ moment, but as part of a continuum, a stream of sacred reality that only has meaning when seen as the connected part of the whole. And the word that best defines this part in the great Godly connectedness is **transformation**: the disciples understood the Ascension not as the beginning of the end but, in Winston Churchill’s words, “the end of the beginning.” The Ascension was for them and remains for us a pointed reminder – summed up by those words of the messengers about not standing gazing into heaven – that our work is here on earth. We don’t need to wait for heaven to experience God’s presence and live out God’s good news. Heaven is for real – and it’s right here as well as on the far shore of mortality. Our responsibility is to raise up and to live the love that truly lies at the heart of human existence, as well as to reject the evil violence that too easily and too conveniently comes to hand when misguided human beings struggle for what we might believe to be good and appropriate goals. As the ancient British monk Pelagius said, we can truly call ourselves Christians if we seek to be “holy, humble, virtuous and righteous; to be [one] whose way of life is founded on works of mercy and justice.”

In this moment, in Manchester, I doubt that 22 families have the strength to be able to hope that the future holds within it the possibility for transformation. For them, and for all who are struggling and find no brightness in the dark, empty recesses of a scorched existence, we have to be the ones who hope and trust on their behalf. Each moment like this is an opportunity to take our place as Jesus’ companions in creative transformation, through prayer and through action. God is in us and with us, and is calling us forward toward new adventures in faithful discipleship. This includes bearing one another’s burdens, especially the burdens of those who are simply incapable of bearing their own right now.

No, violence is not the primary defining characteristic of human identity. We humans are called to exemplify as the highest expression of the human soul and spirit a love for each other, for this created world we share, and for God. That’s the joy the disciples understood as they journeyed not just back to Jerusalem but also on into the future God was calling them to, a calling to us too, to engage each other and our world for good, with passion and commitment.

On this Memorial Day weekend it seems to me that the simple words of Dwight Eisenhower make plain the call to each and all of us away from the ultimately evil values of war and violence. He said this: “ This world of ours... must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be, instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.” Only in those shared values can we advance the cause of mercy and justice, raising up the love of one another, of our creation, and of God that lies at the heart of the human endeavor.