

The Sunday of the Ascension, 2014. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

If you talk to “those who know” (who ever they are) about writing a novel they’ll often tell you that the first sentence of a novel is the hardest to write. I know that there’s real truth in that because I write something new every week (pretty much) - a sermon’s a lot like a short story, after all.

The first thing you want to avoid is a really hackneyed start. So important is this that it’s been satirized, through “The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest” Have you heard of it? It’s based on the opening lines of a book by Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, written in 1830 and called: “Paul Clifford”. Here’s how it begins: “It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents — except at occasional intervals....”,

I think, though, that it’s the endings that are more difficult. How do you end a long story? Or any story? Especially complex ones, or ones that involve death and destruction, or both? There always seems to be a “let-down” scene - not in the sense that it’s a let-down, but rather something that gently restores the reader or viewer to the real world while leaving the flavor of the other world - the world of the story - still present, if only in intangible whiffs.

The best endings aren’t endings at all; they’re gateways to something else, something new and different, something connected in a meaningful way to what’s gone before.

That’s what we get with the end of Luke’s gospel. “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” (Luke 24: 50-53).

And then we come to the Acts of the Apostles, which tells us this is a separate story: “in my first volume, Theophilus.....” The story continues. And the Ascension is the bridge between the two. Of the nearly fourteen hundred verses in Luke’s gospel, and over one thousand in Acts, the story of the Ascension is contained in four verses.

Luke wasn’t overly concerned with details, either – the chronology is off a little, for instance.

What Luke cared about was telling us this: things have changed. You might think that the story of Jesus ended with the resurrection, but you’d be wrong. I think that’s why he chose 40 days as the gap in time from resurrection to ascension.

Think about it! As Genesis recounts it Noah was afloat 40 days waiting for the new creation promised by God. Moses spent forty days waiting for the New Teaching for the new people promised by God; the Israelites spent 40 years (so we’re told!) wandering in the desert until they were ready to receive the new land promised by God; Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness discerning whether he would accept the new vision of God.

And at the end of forty – well, the end wasn’t the end, but a new beginning – new creation, new

teaching, new home, new vision.

The Day of Ascension was last Thursday. It's always a Thursday because it's always 40 days it's 40 days from the Day of Resurrection to the Day of Ascension – everything gets gathered together: new creation, new teaching, new home, new vision.

Part of seeing a new beginning is encapsulated in that wonderful phrase from these two figures in white: “why are you standing there, gazing into heaven?” Don't just stand there - DO something! At the highest point of the Mount of Olives, one of the sites claimed to be the place of the ascension, now stands the Augusta Victoria Hospital, administered by the Lutheran World Federation. The hospital staff serve Palestinians who are living in the midst of the occupied territories. They are experts in, among other things, radiation therapy and pediatric kidney dialysis. A late 19th-century mosaic on a high wall of the hospital chapel depicts the ascension, with Jesus ascending into the clouds, flanked by the two angels in white. What is notable about this particular depiction is that the angels' eyes gaze not upon the ascending Jesus, but are clearly directed toward the congregation—as if to ask, “Why are you standing looking up to heaven?” Don't just stand there, do something! And to folks who built that hospital - they did. What about us?

That's a part of Luke's message for us: don't see endings. Never see endings. No wonder he records the disciples “return[ing] to Jerusalem with great joy”. What else could be coming now but the new creation of God born from the gift of new teaching – Jesus' new teaching – and the gift of a new home – in this case not a place but a community, the birth of which, in seven short days we will celebrate with as much joy as we can muster!

Our story as 21st Century Christians is changing because our world is in the midst of one of those paradigm-shifting changes that happen rarely in human history, but The Story – with a capital ‘T’ and a capital ‘S’ goes on: that's the story of God, and how, no matter how much changes, the core of that Story remains the same.

And it isn't about what we believe, it isn't about what intellectual constructs we embrace, it isn't about what rituals we use; it's a story about how we live with integrity and authenticity; how we respect the dignity of others and work that the dignity of all might be respected; how we seek justice for those who are exploited and abused; how we seek peace for all; how we love, and are loved.

So celebrate this day as a day that doesn't mark an ending but a new beginning; the transformation of a story that turns out to be our story; celebrate the love of God for us with an unrestrained joy and know that, in the end all will be well.