

The Sunday of the Ascension, May 17, 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland, WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Many of you know that a great deal of energy has been expended to try and figure out which of the gospels is the earliest. There's not enough time for me to say why, but some scholars now say that the earliest gospel that we actually have a text for is the one that contains the following sayings of Jesus: (31) "No prophet is welcome on his home turf; doctors don't cure those who know them." (34) "If a blind man leads a blind man, they both fall into a pit." Any guesses?! Perhaps the following will help: (100) "They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to him, "The Roman emperor's people demand taxes from us." He said to them, "Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor, give God what belongs to God, *and give me what is mine.*"

That last phrase is the give-away - it's not in Matthew, not in Mark, not in Luke, not in John. All of these passages are from the Gospel of Thomas. Thomas is what's called an "Early Sayings Source" – it contains sayings of Jesus and nothing else: aphorisms, brief parables, but no connecting narrative, no stories.

Mark, the next earliest *that we have*, is based on at least one Early Sayings source, to which Mark added the connecting narrative, the stories, the context.

We remember some of the sayings, of course – they're memorable: "do unto others....." "I am the bread of life....." – and the ones I mentioned about the blind leading the blind, or a prophet not being without honor except when he's "from here."

But we remember the stories so much better – both the narratives and the parables! I just have to mention their names and they spring to mind immediately! "The Good Samaritan," "The Prodigal Son," "Jesus walks on water," "Jesus calms the sea," "Jesus overturns the money-changer's tables" and you have the story right there!

That's the way it is with human beings – we do a lot better with stories.

One of my favorites is this one: Jesus and his disciples are walking on the Sabbath through a cornfield and the Twelve begin plucking heads of grain because they're hungry. They get accused of breaking the Law by working on the Sabbath – what does Jesus say? "The Sabbath was made for human beings, and not human beings for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2: 27).

The Gospel of Thomas has great sayings, but Matthew, Mark, Luke, John – they have great stories!

So here's the question: what's more important – the story, or the punch-line? The details, or the outcome?

Sometimes – often – it's easy to get caught up in the story and miss its point. It's the difference between literalism and truth. The question that's most important in this context is this one: which

is more important?

First Nations story tellers often preface the Ancestor Stories they tell by saying something like this: “Now I don’t know if it happened exactly like this, but I know that it’s true!” Yet we can easily get captured by the detail and miss the truth at its heart.

For first century folk, stories were the lens through which they could see Truth – and I mean truth with a capital “T” – the vehicles that transported them to a place of encounter, of transformation, of identity.

We tell stories so that we know who we are. And I mean “we” – story telling forms and transforms and binds us together into a community of common purpose and identity. You can’t do that with aphorisms – with sayings – no matter how good they might be.

For us as Christians, the central stories of our faith are just that: central. Without those stories – of God’s saving events throughout history – we are nothing.

For us as Christians our stories cluster together: around birth, around journey, around conflict and death, around resurrection and new life, and, finally, around departure. We are Christians as much because of what we believe about departure as what we believe about resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit.

Today is about departure – it’s a story of leaving. If we allow the literal details as reported by Luke to get in the way of the Truth of the story, then we’re in trouble – too easily we get bogged down in the minutiae: well, did Jesus disappear upward? How did he ascend into the clouds – a jet-pack? Did God suspend the laws of nature to put on this mighty fine show? What really happened?

The story of faith invites you today to put aside those questions – they fall into the category of not being able to see the forest for the trees; fascinating and often compelling distractions to the core of this delightful story.

As is always the case with stories of faith, this story is primarily not about Jesus, but about us. As with Pentecost, next week, it’s a birthing story of a very worldly church, which is called not simply to stand there, looking up, but to get about the work that Jesus began. “I’m no longer in your way,” Jesus says to us in this moment. “I’m not going to be that present distraction any more – so don’t just stand there, waiting for me to do something; it’s up to you now!” It’s no accident that Luke ends his gospel here – his connected work isn’t a gospel, remember, it’s the Acts of the Apostles: what happens *after Jesus*. John’s Gospel – so astute when it comes to moments like this, nails it, when he reports Jesus as saying “If I don’t go, then the Spirit can’t come” (16:7). If I don’t go then you’ll always be expecting me to be the actor and you the audience; and then you won’t be open to the coming of the Spirit.

The story is important not because of its details but because of what it’s telling us: Those feet disappearing into the clouds, those feet that walked the dusty roads of Palestine, they won’t be

walking the earth again. Those feet so lovingly anointed just before the crucifixion will no longer carry Jesus to the sites of the great stories of our faith.

It's our feet – firmly rooted to the ground – who will do the walking now – taking us to those same places that Jesus frequented – if we take the ascension story seriously that is – now, it's down to us. So where was it that he went? What was it that he did? Our task is to answer those questions and then follow along, picking up where Jesus left off.