

"Dealing and Growing with Emptiness"
"Empty Sky into which Jesus Ascended"

Sermon notes by the Rev. Arnold A. Bush on 7th Sunday of Easter, Ascension Sunday, May 20, 2012, at Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, Tallassee, AL 36078.

Text: Acts 1:9 "After Jesus said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going." Luke 24:51 "While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. "

I Introduction: Experiencing emptiness

Your closest friends move to the West Coast, and you miss their companionship, long talks, and going places together.

When a spouse dies, the survivor says, "The house seems so empty; there's no one to hold my hand, and an empty chair sits at the breakfast table."

In the last week of April, I attended my High School Reunion. I walked four blocks to the high school building, which is now converted into the offices for the school district. I walked around the halls where I had attended classes in the 1950s. I walked into the typing room, the Bible class, and the math, chemistry and physics rooms where the coaches taught me history. Have you ever returned to the home from a family wedding where the youngest child was married? His room and place at the table are empty. Or, your youngest child graduates from college and moves away to start a good job, and you wonder what to do with her empty bedroom.

Last Thursday the church calendar observed the feast of the Ascension when the disciples walked out to Bethany near Jerusalem to see their Lord as he was lifted into an EMPTY SKY. They were instructed to return to Jerusalem and WAIT for him to return. These 10 days, from the Ascension to Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, are days of WAITING. This return of Jesus to the Father God and then his return to his followers is a big TRANSITIONAL PERIOD. Their Lord is not just another human being with whom they can converse and touch. This Jesus is no longer limited to making appearances within a specific geographical space, the Jewish province of Judah and region of Galilee. He is not capable of being a Universal, Transcendent, and Omnipresent God. His followers have to LET GO of some familiar ways of relating to the Risen, Reigning Messiah. These days for them are moments to LET GO AND LET GOD WORK IN A NEW WAY.

II Let Go and let God

As we reflect on the Ascension and the Empty Sky, we can take a quick look at our lives to see if we have released someone or something to God as we understand Him. Here are three categories to LET GO.

- People , Places and Things:
- People: I recall while I was in my 20s, a chaplain said to me in the M.D. Anderson Hospital in Houston when my father died. "Arnold your work now is to give him back to God as he gave him to you." A phrase in a prayer I use at the grave side goes something like this: "Lord, we seem to give him back to you, as you gave him to this family and friends. We thank you for his life, and we do not lose him in giving him to you for we are all yours in your Kingdom." Then the prayer continues with, "Grant us your grace to

return to our duties of family and vocation with less trust in ourselves and more trust in you.”

- Places: I think of three places in my earlier life, school, home, and college. During the last week in April while attending a high school reunion, we were guests of my brother who has been living in the family home where I grew up. I toured my high school building now converted to administrative school district offices and then on May 11, I returned to Sewanee where I spent 5 years, 2 college and 3 in seminary. As I prepared this Ascension sermon, I realized the house I grew up in, the high school I attended, and the buildings at Sewanee all have one thing in common. Their purpose is to educate and influence us for a few years and then send us on to a new phase of our lives. We must say good-bye and let go as we enter this next step. We are not to hang on all our lives under the influence of our PARENTS, HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE TEACHERS.
- Things: As we transition in our phases in life from childhood to senior adults, we become attached to habits that may not be good for us. I have learned to let go of bad habits such as not paying attention to members of my family, or as a parish priest and trying to do everything in the congregation and not empowering the laity. I have also let go of some bad eating habits. The emphasis is on SOME EATING HABITS.

III Letting Go of high, intense, spiritual experiences.

I recall two lectures, one by Dr. Martin Marty, a respected Christian historian, on “Warmed up Religion” and the other, given by a priest specialist in Christian Formation, that were helpful on this topic. The point of these lecturers was that there are some Christians who emphasize that everyone needs a “high spiritual experience” that recharges their emotions. I include myself in this emphasis and my teachings. This experience may be a revival, a Cursillo weekend, a new awaking experience on a weekend. These events are so intense, so satisfying that their Christianity is all from the HEART AND NOTHING FROM THE RATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE HEAD. Some Christians are addicted to taking their spiritual temperatures constantly. I believe God blesses us with moments of insights and feeling good, but we also need to conceptualize our beliefs and develop disciplines to carry us during the dry periods of our journey. Thus, you and I need to let go of the need for always wanting an intense spiritual experience while realizing God can also work through our intellectual and conceptual processes of the brain.

IV Letting Go of External Stimuli, or External Relationships to Develop Internal Resources.

Before the Ascension and Return of Jesus as the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ followers were accustomed to responding to Jesus through the external senses. He conversed and consumed food with them at meals; he touched their feet as he washed their feet; he took small children into his arms and blessed them; he reached out with his hands and healed all sorts of diseases. After the Ascension and the Day of Pentecost, Jesus’ followers had to move from external relations with him to a more internal relationship.

For us, there is a conversion or movement from the external to practices of an internal nature. Here are two examples: I am attending a seminar at the Diocesan Camp McDowell

near Jasper, AL. In the lecture room, the speaker is giving great lecture, using visual aids, power point, question and answer and singing of hymns to reinforce her points. Then she wants all of us to internalize these truths of the Christian faith. She says "You have until 4:30 pm to return. I want all of you to be silent, no sub conversations, extroverts. Sit on the dock at least 15 minutes and take a walk alone on the walking path around the lake. Take a 30 minute nap but no internet surfacing. At 3:00 pm meet with your group of 4 to share your application and at 3:30 pm, go to your room and take a fresh sheet of paper and begin to write down some ways these truths may apply in your work, your extended family, your leisure, and your rest and wellness habits. Share these thoughts with your learning partner and then return to the lecture room. Social hour will be a 5:15 pm with refreshments." This is an example of internalizing your spiritual resources.

A second example: A junior executive is attending a 6 day Outward Bound experience in Colorado. All the exercises are designed to create internal strengths and character while learning to make boundaries and depend on the Holy Spirit to provide inner strength.

V Letting go of living totally by RULES AND KEEPING ORDER.

A word of disclaiming here: I am not taking about anarchy in the culture or a society without any laws or boundaries for its citizens. There is a type of Christianity that depends totally on obeying the rules and laws. When you and I understand RULES, REGULATIONS, and PROCEDURES as a life style, then we assume that any problem can be solved by imposing a new regulation upon the offending teen or adult. Some Christians tend to want to be TOLD WHAT NOT TO DO AND WHAT TO DO, OR WHAT TO BELIEVE AND WHAT NOT TO BELIEVE.

Sometimes a person's problems and conflicts are more than just enforcing an external rule on the person. There are some addictions that require a complete deep healing of emotional or mental problems. However, I have known of supernatural conversions or healings that changed the destructive behaviors of parishioners.

Also, speaking on living totally by rules and regulations, I believe the Holy Spirit gives us the power to live with uncertainty and ambiguity. To live faithfully in following Christ sometimes means not knowing which direction to go.

Conclusion: The followers of Jesus had to make transitions after the Ascension and the Day of Pentecost. Let Go and Let God. Let go of past people and places; let go of intense spiritual experiences so to use our God given rational minds; let go of a lifestyle of all rules and regulations to become creative followers of Christ. It is easier to talk about letting go, but actually doing so is a HARD DECISIONS TO MAKE.

Clayton Bardeau, a family therapist in San Francisco, said many depressions (not the classical chemical depressions) are often signs of a struggle to give up something. I am depressed because my children are moving away; I missed that promotion; I have to move away from my friends. These things are tough, but it means new possibilities are now present.

The Sky is a symbol of limitless opportunities, transitions, and possibilities. Our Lord leaves so he can fill us with a deeper level of the Holy Spirit. He returns to give is a more intimate way to experience him internally. He withdraws in order to draw all people to himself.