

“The Guys in White” / Acts 1:1-11 / 12 May 2013

It was a dramatic exit in *Gone with the Wind*, when Rhett Butler uttered Hollywood's first-ever profanity at Scarlett and then strode off into the morning mist. It was a dramatic exit in *Casablanca* when Ilsa boarded an airplane bound for Lisbon and escaped just as the German officer arrived to send her back to the concentration camp. For that matter, it was a dramatic exit in that same film when Humphrey Bogart, too, disappeared into the mist, telling his new accomplice, “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” It was a dramatic exit in *Thelma and Louise*, when the police were closing in on the two friends at the edge of the Grand Canyon; they were wanted for the accidental murder of a would-be rapist. And instead of surrendering, they grip hands and hit the gas, and you see their little convertible plummeting over the edge of the canyon. Actually, that might be Hollywood's most dramatic exit ever.

But dramatic exits happen in real life, too. Like three years ago when a frustrated flight attendant quit his job. Do you remember the story? On a flight from Pittsburgh to New York, the plane had just touched down at JFK, when the attendant decided he'd had enough of serving drinks and telling people when to sit down and turn off their electronic devices. He'd been feeling mistreated by one of the passengers—though no one on the flight recalls any trouble—so he got on the loudspeaker and uttered some profanities better than Rhett Butler's. Then he said, “I've been in this business for twenty years. That's it. I'm done.” He grabbed two beers out of the fridge, pulled the emergency escape chute—an inflatable slide—and he went sliding off the plane...and into a very brief period of fame. Of course, it didn't end very well for the frustrated flight attendant. He was arrested for criminal mischief and reckless endangerment. He later tried to show up for work, saying that he never meant anyone to take him literally, but JetBlue wouldn't take him back. The incident set off a string of minor copycat exits, where other people who hated their jobs also left in dramatic fashion and without giving their two-weeks notice.

First impressions are surely important. A good entrance is always nice. But nothing beats a really poignant, cinema-quality exit, which usually involves explosions, or planes, or trains, or blinding light, or at least clouds and fog. Interesting that all the way back in the Book of Acts, Jesus disappears into a mist, just like the heroes in *Gone with the Wind* and *Casablanca*.

The difference is that, in the movies, a dramatic exit gives you a sense of satisfaction and closure. But if you need closure, then don't bother with the Book of Acts. Acts leaves you hanging with main characters in prison awaiting trial. Some key players just sort of disappear in the middle of the book. Acts *begins* with a dramatic exit and trails off without any ending at all. Acts is about church, and—as its name implies—it's about continuous, ongoing action. It's a “choose-your-own-adventure book” that the Spirit is still writing with your life and with mine. Acts is a book that you and I are helping to write still today, as we carry the never-ending story of faith into our own day-to-day worlds. And I'm touched by the words that are spoken on that Mount of Ascension by the two strangers in white, who ask, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand there, gazing up to heaven?”

Can you believe it? It's those two guys in the white robes again. Do you remember these fellows from Easter morning, seven weeks ago? Luke—who wrote the Book of Acts as well as the third gospel—Luke first introduced these guys back at the empty tomb, where they asked the grieving women, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” And now, at Jesus' dramatic exit, they've shown up again, and they're still behaving in the same exact way, asking rhetorical questions that don't really have answers. This time, they say, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand there, looking up toward heaven?” In both cases, their questions are impatient and just a little unfair. Clearly, the women were looking for Jesus among the dead because they saw him die. Obviously, the men were staring toward the sky because they just saw Jesus disappearing in that direction. Those guys in white, you can almost hear the sarcasm in their tone. “Why are you standing there, looking to heaven?” I don't know if these two are angels, or messengers, or just character actors who show up for comic relief. They might be the guys God hires to turn up at strange, transitional moments in history. Maybe they'll appear for each

of us eventually. Maybe, when you wake up from dying, it's these two that you'll see, asking their "why" questions. "Why do you look so surprised? Why are you gaping at us? Why didn't you run a comb through your hair? You know you're about to meet God!" Funny how these two guys resurface.

But faith is a circular story, not linear. Faith is a story without any real beginning and certainly without ending, and if ever there are dramatic exits—as perhaps there are—then they're awkwardly placed at the occasional endings and beginnings of new chapters, but never of the book of faith itself. No, this long and rambling Book of Acts is still trailing off into the millions of lives that have been visited by the Spirit's presence, moved by Jesus' words, jolted into action for the life of the world. The dramatic exits are the passing of the baton from one hand to the next, and sometimes those who receive do not feel altogether ready to take up the tasks. But that's the story of faith. It draws you in, assigns to you a duty, then asks, "Hey, you, yeah you! Men of Galilee, woman of Upper St. Clair, man of Mt. Lebanon! Why are you standing there looking at the sky? It's time to get busy. The world is a-waiting. Do something."

If those men of Galilee were standing there, staring at the sky, it was probably in part because they didn't know where to begin. They felt their moment in history weighing upon them, and that's always a terrible burden. In their case, how to transition from life with Jesus to life in Jesus' name. They don't know how to go about being the people they now know they have to be, stepping up and taking over where Jesus himself left off. And really, where do you start? We, in our time and place, hesitate for much the same reasons when we sense the weight of our moment in history. Do you start in Haiti or at home? Do you start with water, or hunger, or homelessness? Do you start with the big, systemic injustices that we all take part in, the trade inequities, the ecological ruin? Or do you start with the deep breaches in the human spirit, the sadness, the loneliness, the anxiety, the creeping despair that grips our hearts and our homes, our cities and nations? Where to start in addressing the many grievances of a beautiful, broken world?

You'd stare at the sky, too, looking for answers, looking for help from above. In fact, you probably do stare at the sky from time to time, wondering what to do. Or you stare at your hands, or out the window, or at the TV, or into the mirror. You, too, stand and stare from time to time for want of knowing exactly how to proceed. But those guys in white seem to be saying, "Acts is about action. Don't just stand there. It's time to get moving."

Everyone's life is marked by unwanted exits—some of them dramatic and some of them simply painful and unwelcome. And I'm not sure which thing most of us do more: stand and stare at the emptiness that's left behind or scurry like mice to keep ourselves busy. From the time that screaming alarm clock jolts us out of sleep in the morning until the time our restless waking thoughts fade once again to dreams, life pulls us in every which direction. The Episcopal bishop of Boston, in the last century, was a famous churchman named Philips Brookes. He was the author of the Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and he was known as an eloquent preacher and a man who was fond of children. One day in a wealthy part of Boston, Brookes was walking down the street when he saw a little fellow on the porch of a fine mansion, reaching as high as he could for the doorbell. The boy strained and strained but couldn't reach the bell. Brookes stepped onto the porch and said to the boy, "Here, let me help you with that." Brookes rang the doorbell. And the boy—scampering off the porch—shouted back to Brookes, "Now run like the devil." And the Episcopal bishop of Boston, the Right Reverend Philips Brookes—not knowing what else to do—ran...like the devil. And sometimes we do, too. Not knowing what else to do, we just run like the devil from one busy task to the next. It seems better than staring at the emptiness that we would feel if we ever stopped moving. But when life becomes a struggle just to avoid facing our unhappiness, then something's got to give. If we were to be honest with ourselves, we might admit that we run a dozen different directions in a single day because we don't have a single direction—or set of directions—to follow. We don't know what to do with ourselves. We don't know which causes to throw our energies into. We don't know which people to invest our time in. We don't know which newspaper articles to shed tears over. We want to get

involved. We want to make a difference, but we don't know where to start.

During our Haiti trip, Pat Jacobs was teaching twenty-two Haitians about the need for clean water and clean hands. One of their class learning projects was to prepare paper chains and banners for the big day when the whole village would come out to get their first drink of water from the newly installed water purification system. There was one old woman in the class who wanted to give back. She wanted to take part in the class project. But her hands were too weak to cut the construction paper into little chain link rectangles. And her hands were too arthritic to bend the little rectangles into links and staple them together. She wasn't able to help with the banners because she couldn't hold a marker...and probably didn't know how to write. And so, unable to participate in any other way, she stood beside Pat and simply handed her little strips of paper as Pat made the chain, and the job went faster because of her small contribution. That frail little woman knew what those two guys in white were telling those men of Galilee so long ago: Acts is the never-ending story of the great and small actions of faith performed by the people of God. Christ is known better in the doing than in the believing.

If you want closure, you've come to the wrong place. This ancient Book of Acts is still being written in your life and in mine. Jesus made his dramatic exit at the beginning of a long-ago chapter, but those men in white still show up to ask their age-old question: "Don't you know that the only way to discover Jesus is to get your hands dirty with the work that he left undone?" Today we welcome new elders and deacons to lead our congregation into the future, and other elders and deacons will make their dramatic exits from service...for now. But whoever you are, you too have a calling in the life of the church. What is your task, what do you do? Amen.