

“A Grand Goodbye” / Luke 24:44-53 / 1 June 2014 / Ascension Sunday

Is it better to make a really good entrance, or a glorious exit? I'm not sure. I often forget the first time I ever met most people. But I've only rarely forgotten the very last time I've seen a person. Those last goodbyes linger so much longer in the memory, in the heart, for “goodbye” tells of absence. And yet, Jesus' goodbye promise is that he is not absent. He still comes in the form of courage, and strength, and comfort. He comes as that illusive, mysterious, all-transforming Spirit.

Think of some of the grand goodbyes we've seen in the movies. Of course, you've got John Wayne shooting up all the bad guys on the western frontier, then riding off into the sunset...alone. As you see him and his horse disappearing, the music rises to a grand crescendo of satisfaction, almost joy, and you know that “alone” is exactly how he wants to be. You've got Arnold Schwarzenegger telling the officer behind the police desk, “I'll be back.” The Austrian actor had difficulty pronouncing the word “I'll,” and so he asked the director if he could say, “I *will* be back.” The director refused, and now “I'll be back” is one of the most memorable lines in movie history. Script writers have seen to it that Schwarzenegger repeated that same line in every one of his movies thereafter, like a child repeating the same joke over and over again in hopes of getting more laughs.

My professor of New Testament Greek, in seminary, used to tell his classes that *Casablanca* was the best movie ever made. He's a man of strong opinions who based our grades on whether we agreed with him or not. (He's achieved international acclaim for some of those opinions.) But fortunately, *Casablanca* was not on the final exam. All I remember about that movie is its dramatic ending, with its sad and heroic goodbye. Ilsa is a married woman, and Rick—played by Humphrey Bogart—has to get her and her husband safely out of Nazi controlled territory in North Africa. But Ilsa is secretly in love with Rick; she has been for years. They'd been together once in Paris, long before her marriage. In the final scene, Rick tells Ilsa to leave him, to go to safety with her husband. “If that plane leaves and you're not on it, you'll regret it. Maybe not today, and maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life.” “But what about us?” Ilsa protests. And Bogart replies, “We'll always have Paris.” “And I said I would never leave you,” she says softly. “And you never will.” Then the lines begin to sound strangely like the Gospel of John. “I've got a job to do to, and where I'm going you cannot follow, and what I'm doing you cannot be any part of. It doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that. Now, now”—as she begins to cry—here's looking at you, kid.” There's no goodbye kiss, because she's a married woman. The hero has resisted temptation. He's preserved Ilsa's marriage and saved her life, and as the Nazi officer speeds toward them, the plane roars away in the distance, a grand goodbye.

Goodbyes are always more poignant than the hellos. Luke alone gives us the great big hello-to-Jesus in his Christmas stories, and Luke alone gives us a grand goodbye both in his gospel and in the Book of Acts, which he also authored. Now think for a moment about the goodbyes in your life, and the absences that they have heralded. Alas, my difficult weekly task is to squeeze graceful, wordless truths into clunky and often graceless words. Ascension Sunday declares a truth too deep to tell with words, for it's a truth that we usually only know in our stomachs and in our hearts, in our spirits and in our bones. It announces that our loved ones live within us even in their absence. Indeed, God is present even in God's seeming-absence.

Christ's life in the gospels unrolls almost like a movie. The antagonists are all the religious people who should have been friends. But here in the final scene of the story, after they've done their worst to him, and all the tragedy of his life has been made right, the wounds healed, here we have the grand goodbye. His teaching, and his healing, his living, and his loving, and especially his dying: these things have climaxed in his coming to a mysterious new kind of life on the other side of it all. Resurrection. His story is the parable for any life well lived. It teaches that life has meaning when we give it away for something greater than ourselves, when we live for those things that heal the world. We'll get beaten down and perhaps even die for those things. But on the other side of suffering, there is

fuller life, more joyful living, right here in this world.

Always, six weeks after Easter, I'm faced with a decision. If I'm not preaching today the sermon or the text that are listed in the bulletin, it's because always on the Sunday before Pentecost I've got a tough choice. The Sunday service can either be "The 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter," or it can be "Ascension Sunday." I thought I would chicken out and treat today like the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter. But at the last minute, after the bulletins were all printed, I changed my mind and decided it's time at last to talk about Ascension, for Ascension speaks of something we all know quite well: the disappearing of God. Ascension is hard stuff. The gospel tells us that a cloud came and bore Jesus away into heaven. We know now that even if Jesus is flying at the speed of light, he'd still be floating out there, well within the bounds of our galaxy. But that's not the hardest part about Ascension. The hardest part is that he leaves his friends standing there, staring up at the sky, not knowing what to do or where to go. He's snatched from his loved ones' reach and returned to the place that he calls home, the place we all call home, the home that we yearn for in silent moments, when our emotions are close to the surface, when we feel strikingly un-at-home in all the places where we ought to belong, the home that—I truly hope—will snatch us all up in the end. In some ways, Ascension strikes a note of sorrow, for it's about the withdrawal of God, the snatching up of God, the disappearing God, and God's seeming-absence in a place where we yearned for presence. And yet, his parting promise is that Christ comes to us forever in the form of courage, and strength, and comfort. Even in the seeming-absences, the Christ Spirit empowers us.

Where do you see the absences of God in your life, in our world? Truly, if you don't sometimes sense that great, lonely absence, that deep longing for what ought-to-be-but-isnt, then, well, frankly you're the only one who doesn't sometimes feel it. I've told you before about some of the things I find on FaceBook. Now, just a refresher for those of you who don't use Face-Book: It's a place on the Internet where you can keep in touch with people all around the world. I especially like it because it keeps me in contact with people I care about but to whom I would never write a letter. It's a repository for pictures, and personal thoughts, and social commentary. You end up getting a lot of politics on FaceBook, too. I logged onto FaceBook, recently, thinking to amuse myself, when I came across a photo that one of my acquaintances in Africa had put up. Now, some folks have a higher threshold for gruesome images than others. Especially in violent places, like West Africa, people do not turn away. But this photo showed a scene of violence so horrific that I will not even describe it to you. And that horrible act was being inflicted on a very small child, with great fear and pain in her eyes. The person who posted the picture was trying to tell everyone about the injustice that women and girls suffer in many parts of the world, especially India. He succeeded in creating disgust and outrage in all of us, but it felt like a helpless outrage. Now I'm been left with this horrid image in my head, haunting me, causing me to sense the real absence of God in some places in our world. Sometimes we, like those silly disciples, stand staring up at the sky, gazing at God's absence, asking ourselves, "What now?" That helpless outrage of God's seeming-absence needs a channel for action in the world.

Going away is often sloppy. A couple was spending one night out of town. They called a cab and put the cat out. The taxi arrived, but as the couple walked out the front door, the cat shot between their legs, back into the house and up the stairs. Knowing that the cat would wreck the house while they were gone, the husband ran upstairs to chase the cat out again while the wife waited in the taxi. Since she didn't want the cab driver to know that the house would be left unoccupied, the woman explained: "My husband is just going upstairs to say goodbye to my mother." A few minutes later, the husband reappeared and climbed into the taxi. "Sorry I took so long," he said. "Stupid old thing was hiding under the bed, and I had to poke her with a broom till she crawled out. But I chased her out the back door, and locked her in the shed."

Unlike most of the grand goodbyes in the movies, Jesus' great departure is not a final gesture of victory. I wish it were that easy. Roll the credits, raise the lights, and we can all go to bed. No, when Jesus bids his followers goodbye, he's commissioning us to get out there and take over in all the places

where he's leaving off. He's saying, essentially, "There's only one of me, but there's a lot of you. Now, you go and be Christ to each other and to the world around you. It's your turn to save the world, but don't worry. I'll be the courage, and the strength, and the comfort that you need to do the job." You see, God's presence in our lives isn't just to us to make us feel good, to give us peace of mind and a sense of well-being. That's what Valium is for. Peace of mind is often a byproduct of throwing your life into meaningful pursuits, but it's not the chief end of those pursuits. God's Spirit is to empower us to get out there and be Christ's presence in a world that knows his troubling absence, a world that still inflicts unspeakable atrocities on women and girls, a world where the poor are daily robbed of their dignity, a world where whole social and political systems are built upon subtle injustices that most of us benefit from but never see. When you walk out these doors today, perhaps before you make it as far as the parking lot, you will gaze into the seeming absences of God in your own life or in the life of another. The lonely kid, the misunderstood senior, the overwhelmed parent, the long-suffering spouse. You cannot fix the absences in your own life. That's like taking out your own appendix. But you can bear Christ's presence into the great absences all around you. Your stumbling words may or may not do the trick. Your uncertain actions may or may not do it. The best way to soothe an aching absence is to be a living presence. You can do that. Christ still comes to us in the form of courage, and strength, and comfort. Christ still comes in you. Amen.