



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

May 8, 2016
Ascension Sunday

Out of the Nest
Luke 24:44-53; Acts 11:1-11

Today is Mother's Day. It is a day when we honor our mothers for all they have done for us, thank our mothers for all they continue to mean to us, and bless the memory of our mothers who are no longer with us. For all of the good feelings, the flowers, the food, and the family gatherings, we also know that this day is difficult for some of us. The grief over mothers who have died, the pain of losing a child, the unfulfilled desire to be a mother, and the heartache of not having a mother who loved as you needed are sometimes compounded on a day like this one. That is why we are here. In this fellowship we find love and support for whatever needs we have. In this place we sense the presence of God and the grace of our Heavenly Parent. Within this family of faith we know that we are not alone. In that sense, there is much for all of us to celebrate today.

Nevertheless, we know that as beautiful and meaningful as motherhood can be, there is also a complicated relationship between mothers and their children. In what we think of as an ideal world, parents raise and nurture their children, prepare them for life as adults, and send them out into the world, much as a mother bird pushes her fledglings out of the nest so that they will spread their own wings and fly. So imprinted is this model in our lives that when the last child leaves home, we talk about having an "empty nest."

Well, times have changed, adolescence has grown longer, and opportunities for meaningful work that provides a livable wage are not as abundant as they once were. The other day I found a poem that I thought expressed rather well the feelings that many children now-a-days have toward their mothers:

Mom, I know you do a lot
Like cooking all the food,
washing dirty laundry,
to detecting my bad moods.

I try to do my part, too
in between playing my video games
like taking out the trash
and washing the window panes.

Mom, I know that you'll be saddened
when I have to leave the nest
But right now, I'm only 33
and living at home is the best!¹

We laugh at such words but we also know that it is sometimes very beneficial to parent and child to share a home. We also know that because of the economy and the difficulty of finding jobs that pay well, a number of children have to live at home for a while. We call it "home" because that is the place we are always welcomed and safe. And remember: Jesus was 30 years old when he finally moved out on his own!

In an intriguing coupling of events, today we celebrate not only Mother's Day, but the Ascension of Christ as well. It is the ultimate "leaving home" experience for Jesus as he returns to his heavenly home. In another sense, it is also the moment when he pushes his disciples out of the nest he created, urging them to spread their wings, take flight, and live the gospel throughout the world.

Luke is the only source we have for the story of the Ascension. Actually, he tells it twice, first in the gospel which bears his name and then in the Acts of the Apostles. In the gospel version, Luke begins with Jesus' resurrection and his appearance to the women who share the good news with the skeptical disciples. A long day ensues with Jesus appearing to two followers on the road to Emmaus and then, after vanishing, presents himself to the disciples locked in that familiar upper room. From there, Luke tells us, Jesus walked with his dear friends as far as Bethany and there ascended into heaven before their eyes. In this version, Luke suggests that Jesus ascended on the day of his resurrection.

Then, as if to clarify any misunderstanding, Luke begins his story of the Early Church with Christ's ascension. Listen to this version:

¹Anonymous, "Never Leaving the Nest," *Hubpages*; available online at: <http://hubpages.com/holidays/7-funny-mothers-day-poems>.

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Acts 1:1-11

Luke describes how they return to Jerusalem and the upper room they had come to know so well. He names the individual disciples. Almost as a footnote, we read these words: "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (Acts 1:14).

Mary was there. She was not distraught. She was not wringing her hands. She had done her job. She had raised her son to be the Savior of the world. Her work was done and she was content.

I get that same sense of completeness from Jesus. Luke tells us in Acts that over a period of forty days, Jesus has appeared to his disciples, spent time with them, and continued to explain the Kingdom of God he has inaugurated in their midst. Just before he departs, he gives them one final nudge to send them soaring into the kingdom on their own. He reminds them that they will be surrounded by the power of the Holy Spirit and that they are

to begin their ministry "in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Having completed his work among them, having taught and nurtured them into spiritual maturity, Jesus departs the nest, and the disciples fly into the heart of the Gospel.

Since that day, every believer, every fellowship of faith, has experienced Jesus' ascension over and over. When we come to faith, we do so in a childlike way, depending on others to teach us about God, to share with us the stories of Jesus, and to help us grow in faith. There always comes a point when it is time for us to step into the Gospel for ourselves, to live out the Good News, and to become witnesses through our lives.

Jesus wisely told his disciples to begin their ministry in Jerusalem, the place where they found themselves at the time. It was home base for them, the community they knew the best, desperate for the Good News Jesus brought. Then they were to move into the larger region of Judea, the province which included Jerusalem. From there they would also venture into Samaria, the former Northern Kingdom, still home to their cousins in the faith from whom they were, by and large, estranged. Finally, they were to take the Gospel throughout the world. That is exactly what they did.

Sixty-one years ago, a group of followers were pushed out of their nest, their comfort zone, and guided to establish this congregation right here at home. Rocky Mount was their Jerusalem and their calling was to begin a new ministry here where lives have been nurtured and faith shared for over six decades. Throughout those years, Lakeside has ministered throughout this area in a variety of ways. We have shared the Gospel throughout the world through missionaries, ministries, and sometimes personal involvement.

When our church was founded, it was very much a neighborhood church. Most of our members lived within a few block's walk to the church. Over time, however, some of you moved to other neighborhoods. This immediate neighborhood changed, and we discover that we are no longer the neighborhood church we once were.

Last summer, as part of our Sixtieth Anniversary Celebration, we surveyed the congregation to seek out a fresh vision of ministry for Lakeside Baptist Church. A consensus soon formed that we become more involved in our immediate neighborhood and discover how we might be a better neighbor than we have been in recent years.

A committee was formed which met with other neighborhood groups to discover what they do to support one another. They met with pastors of nearby churches and with community leaders. They met some of our neighbors and asked about the needs in this neighborhood. What emerged was a picture of a very diverse neighborhood with an immediate need simply to get to know one another.

It was discovered that there is no neighborhood association in this area from City Lake to Harris Street and from Western Avenue to the Tar River. One of the first things we might be able to do is to help organize a community group that would foster friendships, identify needs, and increase cooperation among neighbors. But first we want to get to know our neighbors. One of the best ways to do so is to have a picnic. So, in celebration of our own anniversary and in honor of our founders who began a new ministry here, we will help host a neighborhood picnic at Sunset Park on June 5, the day of our founding.

It will be a fun evening with games and activities for all ages. There will be ball games, train and carousel rides, and the spray park for children. There will be a cookout and the usual delicious food that you prepare. Most important, there will be strangers who will soon become friends, as we share the day with the other people who live in this area.

All we want to do at this point is to be a good neighbor. If that means nothing more than making new friends and saying a hearty "Hello!" when we go through the neighborhood, then fine. If it means that we discover some needs that we can help meet like tutoring or music lessons or repairing homes or visiting elderly neighbors, then all the better. If we convey the love of Christ by being good neighbors in whatever ways arise, then we will have fulfilled Christ's calling to us all.

We are being pushed from the nest, from the comfortable place we have occupied for so many good years. We are being called to minister in a fresh way in this, our Jerusalem. We are being nudged to spread our wings and fly into the heart of the gospel. I am reminded of Jesus at the wedding in Cana when Mary nudged him to begin his ministry by making sure the guests were not disappointed and the hosts were not embarrassed. I am reminded of the disciples who were presented the challenge of sharing the Gospel with the world. And I am reminded of the people who founded this church, pushed by the Holy Spirit to begin a new ministry right at home. I am

reminded of you who are always eager to test the wings of your faith in whatever ways God in Christ calls us.

I would have thought Mary would have gone with Jesus to see him until the last moment possible, clinging to his robe, and reminding him of all the lessons she had taught him and of the love she had for him. But she did not. She was a good and loving mother. She had done her job and she sent her son and Savior off with the confident love of a mother. Jesus did the same when he called his disciples to take up his ministry. God now calls us through our mother the church to fly the nest and share his love in a fresh way. Let us spread our wings and fly with the Gospel!

May 8, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intecession

Holy and Merciful God, we come to you at the invitation of your love and lift our hands and hearts and voices in total praise to you. As a mother gives life and nourishment to her children, so you watch over and care for your Church, nurturing and sustaining us for the journey of faith. We thank you that among your countless gifts given for our well-being, you have rooted our lives in beautiful and meaningful relationships. On this day, we are especially grateful for mothers who cradled us in love before we were yet born, for arms that held us, and for care and encouragement that willed our thriving. We offer thanks, too, that we received first, from those who love us best, the lessons that brought growth and maturity and that continue to guide us. But we recognize even with the importance of these kinships and connections, that our relationship with you is the source and purpose for all of life. In each day, each relationship, each opportunity, O Lord of all, we receive generous blessings from your hand, and we raise to you our prayers and hymns of grateful praise.

We praise you, too, Gracious God, that our risen and ascended Christ left us with his example of how to live and how to love and with a call for us to become witnesses to your mercy and partners in the work of your kingdom. Even as we have been loved, we pray that you would teach us to love one another. Hear our prayers for all who are wounded in body and in spirit and long to be made whole. Hear our prayers for those who suffer because of violence or persecution and long to know freedom and peace. Hear our prayers for those trapped in a cycle of poverty or hunger or addiction and long for relief. Hear our prayers for those who are consumed by loneliness or despair and long for companionship and hope. May we have the grace and the courage to bring healing where there is pain, peace where there is unrest, mercy where there is suffering, and light where there is darkness. Make of us your instruments that we might join in your redemptive work for the sake of our brothers and sisters everywhere. Bless us with such grace that our lives may become a blessing for the world now and for all our days to come. Through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

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