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Sermon preached at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, Maine  
May 13, 2018—Ascension of Our Lord (also Mothers' Day)  
Texts: Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11 (read in that order)

### **Steeped in Resurrection**

It's the end of one story and the beginning of another.

Graduations are like that. The other day my 5-year-old son told me about the songs his class is learning for preschool graduation. Then I saw some paper cutouts of graduation hats his teacher was working on, one with his name on it. And even though I have always said I would never be that mom who was a mess of tears over all the growing-up moments, I found my heart catching in my throat. I found myself wondering, is he ready? Does he have the confidence and the skills he needs for the next stage?

The end of one story and the beginning of another. Many transitions are like that. It's become kind of a cliché, but we often think of these times as launching off on a new journey. At these times, it's natural to wonder, do we have what we need in order to launch with confidence into whatever comes next?

Today we hear the story of the ascension, when Jesus is lifted up to heaven. It is the end of one story. And it's the beginning of another. Here, it's the disciples who are about to launch into something new. Are they ready? Do they have what they need?

Luke is the only one of the four gospel writers to tell this story, but he tells it twice. We read both tellings just now. In the last verses of Luke's first book, the gospel, the ascension is the end of Jesus' story as a human being on earth. In Luke's second book, known as Acts of the Apostles, the ascension begins the story of the church. Jesus' departure in one sense makes room for a different kind of presence. It sets the scene for the disciples to launch into something new. They will be sent out to bear the love of God, continue the ministry of Jesus, and proclaim the good news of abundant life to "the ends of the earth." What do they need to do that with confidence?

Well, for one thing, they need the Holy Spirit, which is Jesus' Spirit.

At this point in the story, the disciples are still waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled. That will happen ten days *after* the ascension, when they are gathered for the Jewish festival of Pentecost; the Spirit will come on the disciples with a whoosh of wind and tongues of flame. We'll hear that story next week. The ascension is the first part of the Pentecost story. For Luke, if you don't have the ascension, you can't have Pentecost. Jesus first has to "exit stage left"—or more like, exit stage "up," since that's where ancient people thought heaven was. If he didn't

make an exit, how would he be able to give them his Spirit? As Jesus says in John, “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate (the Holy Spirit) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

The Holy Spirit will give them the confidence for their launch and the skills for their lives and ministry as apostles. But there’s a space between Jesus rising from the dead and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Fifty days space, in fact, reflected in our own church season of Easter which has fifty days between Easter and Pentecost. Forty days into that “season of resurrection,” Jesus ascends into heaven. What are they all doing during those forty days plus ten? If the Holy Spirit will get them ready for their next journey, then what gets them ready for the Holy Spirit?

In Acts, Luke says “he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” He gives a bit more detail in the gospel, where he writes, “Then (Jesus) opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’ ”

It sounds like they get 40 days of teaching about resurrection and all it means for them and for the world that the kingdom of God has begun. The timing makes sense, according to one commentator, because it recalls the time required in that culture for a student to be qualified as a teacher. In order to receive the Holy Spirit and launch with confidence, the disciples are first steeped in resurrection. They learn to reinterpret everything they know about life and God and love, in light of this new thing that has happened, this victory over death. Seeing the risen Jesus is somehow different than the way they were with him before his death. It takes a little time to develop this new skill together.

Their learning is not an intellectual, academic exercise. Resurrection and the kingdom of God are about them. They’ve experienced it, not just heard about it. Luke reports these key words of Jesus twice: “You are witnesses.” If resurrection is true, then they get to rethink what they believe is possible. They’re learning to account for the possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation and healing in brand new ways. Before they launch, they learn to see their whole lives and their whole world in light of resurrection.

Turns out, that’s true for all of us, too, in all our “launches”: We learn to see our lives and our world in light of resurrection and the victory of love that always gets the last word. I remember a time when I was between stories—one had ended, and I was trying to get launched into a new one. I was a freshman in college. Trying to figure out what direction to go with a major, a summer job, a new grown-up identity, I was plagued by the usual insecurities. I was pretty sure I was NOT actually ready to launch and did not have what I needed for the next stage. And I was pretty sure everyone else had it all figured out, which just made things worse.

One day I was lying on my bed feeling this anxiety acutely, when suddenly I heard a voice inside myself: "I have called you by name. You are mine." I didn't recognize it, but it was a voice of love and reassurance that edged out a bit of the insecurity. It was much later that I identified them as words of God from the prophet Isaiah, words that had come back to me from my church upbringing when I most needed them. Life-giving words in the midst of death-dealing anxiety. Words of possibility in the midst of dead-end uncertainty.

If I really belonged to God, who was I to say what I could or couldn't do? If I was known and loved like that, did I really need to worry so much about the things I was supposed to accomplish? Did I really need to earn love and affirmation by making the "right" choices? And if all that was true for me, wasn't it true for everyone else, too?

Today, watching the disciples get ready to launch, I realize that at that moment in college, I was learning to see my life and the world in light of resurrection. I got to rethink what I believed was possible. I could begin to account for the possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation and healing in brand new ways.

I realize that at that moment, what was coming back to me was my baptism, in which God said to me as God says to us all: "I love you. You are mine." Christians have always understood baptism as our own resurrection—in the water we die *and are raised* with Christ. To see ourselves in light of resurrection, is to see ourselves as baptized and beloved children of God, forever. No anxiety, no mistake, no transition, no experience can change that.

I hope my kids learn to see themselves that way. I hope it gives them the confidence to launch into all kinds of new stories and adventures, knowing that no matter what, they are loved deeply and completely. I hope they hear it from their dad and me. But on the days when we are too tired or too frustrated to show them this love, I really hope they experience it from God. God knows, human relationships, like the love of mother and child, can communicate love in powerful ways. God knows also that human relationships can be supremely painful. Not everyone receives the love they want from their mother. Sometimes mothers die too soon. Children don't always receive our love in the way we want. Sometimes children die too soon, or we long for children we never had. When we talk about love in human relationships, sometimes there is as much pain as there is joy and gratitude.

Easter speaks good news into that pain. God's love is stronger than death. Human love is part of that love, but only a part. When God says to us, "I love you. You are mine," it is complete and it is forever. That Easter love helps us rethink again and again what we believe is possible, opening up hope for forgiveness and reconciliation and healing.

Today, as many of us face the end of one story and the beginning of another, I realize why we talk so much here about how much God loves us. We say it over and over. Because this is what gives us the confidence to launch when launching is what we are called to do. Whether we are launching into a new stage of life, a new diagnosis, a new family situation, a new job, a new way to do God's work with our hands—we are never alone. We are loved, no matter how the next story works out. We belong to God's family. In this community we are nourished and sustained by the life of Christ in Word and Sacrament. From this community we are sent out to do God's work of love for the sake of joy: To share the good news of God saying to each and every one: "I love you. You are mine."

Steeped in resurrection love in this Easter season, we pray: Come, Holy Spirit!

***Hymn of the Day: ELW 581, You Are Mine***