

EASTER VII – ASCENSION
ST. CHRISTOPHER’S, MAY 17, 2015

As I watched my parents’ green 1951 Plymouth sedan disappear up the dirt road in a cloud of dust, my heart sank into my high top Keds.

For all eight years of my happy, secure, protected life, my parents and their love and care had always been there - with me and for me.

They were like the air I breathed.

Rarely noticed, but always present.

But now – NOW – they were abandoning me in the wild woods of Dallas County, Alabama, just outside Selma, at a strange, scary and sinister place called YMCA Camp Grist.

Leaving me truly alone for the first time in my young life.

Ten days and ten nights with strangers in this frightening place –

Ten days -practically forever!

With all my heart, I wanted to run after that familiar, turtle-looking car, shouting,

“Stop! Come back! I’ll do anything you say, only don’t leave me alone!

Please, please take me home with you!”

What I actually did was to stand there for a very long time, looking up that now empty road.

Only a little while before, as my mother had expertly made up my cot and helped me arrange my belongings, she had reminded me of how much fun I was going to have,

Of all the nice new friends I was going to make,

Of what a big, brave young man I had become.

And for a few minutes, I had actually believed her.

But now I didn’t feel like a big, brave young man,

And having fun seemed about as likely as my growing wings.

The only thing I wanted in the whole world was to be in that car –

Safely wedged between my mother and father, heading west toward Demopolis, heading home.

I somehow made it through that afternoon –

Passed my swimming test, met my cabin mates who did not seem too dangerous, and managed to choke down a hamburger at supper, followed by a large bowl of vanilla ice cream with fresh peaches.

I may even have laughed a time or two at the Three Stooges movie that evening, but –

But, once I climbed into that unfamiliar bed at “lights out”
and the eerie sound of “Taps” faded into silence,
and the mosquitoes whined around my head,
Then the strange night sounds and the shadows closed in all around me.
No one came to tuck me in, or hear my prayers or kiss me “Good night.”
Slowly but inexorably, homesickness covered me like a physical presence, like a hot, heavy,
musty old blanket, cutting off my air, suffocating me in misery,
until I really and truly believed that I was about to die.
It was the worst I had felt in my whole life.
Doubts and despair filled my head.
If my parents loved me at all, why had they ignored my prayers?
How could they have allowed this disaster to happen?

At last, in desperation, I climbed down from my cot and crept to the bedside of my cabin
counselor, an old guy of at least 15, where I stammered out my distress.
“I’m – I’m sick,” I whispered, hot tears now running down my cheeks.
“My head hurts, and I can’t breathe, and I feel like I’m gonna throw up!”
The counselor did not ever roll over. He had heard it all before.
“Go on back to bed,” he replied and not unkindly.
“You’ll be okay. Don’t bother me again and we’ll talk about it in the morning.”
In the morning? In the morning!?
I’d be dead long before morning!
Morning seemed years away – a distant unattainable vision.
I was certain that I could never fall asleep.
But soon I did, and morning did indeed come as usual,
and with it bright sunshine and bird song, just like at home.
That in itself was reassuring.
And as the days and nights went by, I did begin to enjoy myself –
to have fun.
I did make “nice new friends.”
And I found, to my amazement, that I could in fact survive more or less on my own.
Of course I still had moments when I missed my parents – missed them terribly.
Missed my dog, missed my room, missed my bed –
Missed all those things that were collectively “home.”

But I learned that I could bear it, that I was not going to die of homesickness, even if it still felt a little like that from time to time.

Learned that nothing really awful was going to happen.

Gradually the memory of my parents, and the knowledge of their love for me, our history became something that sustained me, strengthened me, and encouraged me.

Our life together had made me what I was, and because of them, I could make it now.

Somehow they were with me, there at Camp Grist, beside me, inside me.

Sometimes strangely more real, more present than if they had been there in the flesh.

And home – home became something to look forward to when the time was right.

But in the meantime – in the meantime there were campfires, swimming and canoeing; rifles and bows and arrows; ball games and handicrafts – a leather coin purse for my father, a peculiar foil punch picture for my mother – gifts they treasured for the rest of their lives.

And soon the ten days came to an end.

The time to return home finally arrived.

That last morning after breakfast and a final assembly,

I stripped my bed, (which, thankfully I had managed to keep dry)

stuffed my clothes back into my footlocker, and sat on the cabin steps with my new buddies, as one by one they left with their parents.

We promised to see each other next summer – promised that we would all return to Camp Grist.

And then, finally, there they came the same way they had departed.

My own parents, driving down that same dusty road toward me, that green turtle of a car as beautiful as anything I would ever see.

Out of all the people in the world, there they were – My mother and my daddy.

Returned just as they had promised.

How could I have ever doubted it?

As we hugged each other, I don't know who was happier at our reunion.

My father patted me on the back and swore I had grown a foot.

My mother wrinkled her nose and asked if I'd had a shower since I'd been away – and then hugged me again.

We loaded my stuff into the trunk, I waved good-bye to my cabin counselor, and, just as they had promised, my father took me home.

This Feast of the Ascension, which we celebrate today, remembers the departure of our risen Lord Jesus after he had been reunited with his disciples – his friends- for forty days. The Ascension is how the early church struggled to make sense of the fact that Jesus departed from his followers – again.

How do you picture his departure?

Jesus floating serenely into the clouds like a helium-filled balloon?

Blasting off like a space shuttle?

Luke doesn't tell us.

The much more important question is why Jesus could not have remained with them?

Why didn't he?

Why had he instead returned to his heavenly home, after promising them the gift of the Holy Spirit, never to be seen again in physical form?

Like his Resurrection, his Ascension was nice for Jesus,

but what about his friends and loved ones?

What were they to think and do, now that he had left them behind?

No wonder these disciples continued to stare into heaven,

No doubt feeling deserted once more,

so filled with confusion and fear, according to the version of this event in the Acts of the Apostles, that it takes two of God's angels to shake them out of their egocentric trance and send them back to town –

Back to Jerusalem where, Jesus had promised them,

a Spirit-filled future awaited.

And what an adventure it would be for them and for those who collected around them!

Good times and bad, days of hope and glory, and nights of pain and fear.

God continuing his work of salvation, now through them –

salvation for the House of Israel, and then for the whole world.

Soon – just ten days after the Ascension – soon his disciples discovered that their friend Jesus was indeed with them in the power of the Holy Spirit, just as he had promised.

(We will remember and celebrate that event next Sunday – Pentecost)

The disciples soon learned that strangely Jesus was now even closer to them than before, wonderfully and mysteriously closer than when he was with them in the flesh.

They began to feel that **they** were indeed becoming one, just as Jesus and his Father were one.

That he was not only with them, that he was within them,

sustaining, strengthening and encouraging them,
Filling them with this grace and power,
loving them into his own image,
into the people they were created to be,
leading them as they would in turn lead others into his glorious Kingdom.
Leading them into the Kingdom of God, which was their true home.
The home they had been missing their whole lives, they now realized.
The home Jesus promised he was going away to get ready for them.
That was what the emptiness they had always felt was about; the homesickness that at
times would almost overwhelm them.

But in the meantime – that meantime where we live out our earthly lives –
In that meantime they and we are to proclaim the good news of Jesus and his Kingdom,
To be and to make disciples,
To work for justice and peace,
To bring men and women everywhere to Christ and to his salvation.

So that's it, that is what we disciples are to do in the meantime,
not wasting our time looking up to heaven,
but returning to town and getting on with our ministry.
And when we do, we too will discover that through the power of the Holy Spirit,
Jesus is indeed with us, closer than if he were physically present,
filling us with his grace and making us one.

In that meantime there will be homesickness for us from time to time,
there will be difficulties and perhaps even dangers,
but with the promise of the Kingdom and in the power of the Spirit
we can and we will persevere,
Knowing that when the time is right, our loving, faithful Father will do as he has promised
through his beloved Son.

And what a glorious homecoming that will be!
For this Feast of the Ascension is as much a celebration of the reality of our present
oneness and the hope and promise of our future reunion,
As it is of the return of Christ to his heavenly throne.
It is, at least in part, about you and me after all.

I suspect that on that day of our reunion, at our homecoming – whenever that may be -
There will be a spiritual inspection to see how much we have grown,
A celestial sniffing to determine the state of our soul's hygiene,
And without a doubt, many welcoming hugs.
Our faithful God and Father had promised us that when the time is right his Son will return
in clouds of glory, just as he departed,
And on that happy day, our loving Father will bring us home.