

Letting Go

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Acts 1: 6-14

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In my parent's house near Blythewood, SC, the same house where I told you I once got lost in the basement, there is also a long rocky drive way. It is one of those driveways where you know someone is coming a long time before they get to the front door, and you can watch somebody leave for a long time before they're out of sight. It goes down a gentle slope over a creek and some puddles and then goes back up a gentle slope before putting you by the front door. Well, as I was putting this sermon together this week, my mind carried me back to a day in late August of 1990 after getting all my things moved into my dorm room at the University of South Carolina, when I finally pulled out of that long driveway one last time as I went to spend my first night in the dorm before I started class as a college freshman the following day. And I can remember as I pulled out of that long driveway, I was looking in the rearview mirror to see my dad watch me leave until I was out of sight. Now, I was only going about 12 miles down the road. And I would come back many times to do laundry and get a hot meal, but as I pulled out of the driveway, I also know that something was changing. In some way as I made that last trip pulling away from the house, I was no longer a boy any more, I was now a young man, and I think my father was watching me pull out of sight because he knew this was the last time he would see me as a boy, as I crossed over into young adulthood.

Now, I feel sure that had dad not watched me pull out of sight as I drove down that long driveway, I would have been disappointed. It seemed the appropriate thing to do. But how many times have you watched somebody leave and you watched them until they were no longer in sight, because you didn't want them to leave, and you wanted to hang on to that last

moment with them until they were gone, that last moment until the car disappeared down the road, the train disappeared down the tracks, or the plane disappeared behind the clouds.

If you have ever done that, then you understand something of this scene we have today in the opening chapter of Acts. We are at the moment when Jesus' ministry on earth is finally finished. After calling his disciples and feeding the hungry. After healing the blind and the lame and those with leprosy, after dying for the sins of the world and being raised from the dead, we have finally come to the moment when it is time for the Lord to go, and he is ascending into heaven, he is going up into heaven and into the clouds. And as we hear this, we are told the disciples are all gathered on the ground together, watching him as he goes into heaven until he is out of sight. Watching him as if to hold on to the last possible moment when they can be with him and see him until he is gone. But as they do that, we are also told that they are approached by two men who are clothed in white. We don't know anything about these mysterious men, maybe they are clothed in white because they are angels, we just don't know. But as they see the disciples watching Jesus go into the clouds they say something to scold them. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand up looking 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." That's what it says in our translation, but I like the way another translation says it. "You Galileans!—why do you just stand here looking up into an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly—and mysteriously—as he left."

Now if you had known and loved Jesus for three years, if you had known the power of his love and his mercy and kindness well, then, I don't know how you watch him go without looking longingly up into heaven. We are not told this, but I can imagine there were also tears and even

wailing as he went up to heaven. And even if there weren't you couldn't blame anyone for reacting that way. It would be hard to watch him go. But the message of these two mysterious men is stop holding on to a time that is now gone. The Lord will come again in the same way that he left, and in the meantime, there are things to do down here on earth.

Well, clearly much has happened in the days since Jesus left the earth. In fact, if I were to tell you all that has happened since then it wouldn't just take one sermon, it would take a series of sermons. Jesus has been gone from the earth for a very long time. But I wonder if we still look longingly for a time to come back that is now gone. I wonder if you would agree that God's people spend most of their time living in a bygone age, pining for a time that is no more.

Now lest you think I want to do away with everything that has come before this time, I am a big believer in tradition. I am aware that my generation is not the first generation of people to ever worship God and Jesus, and I believe in tradition because I believe we have a lot to learn from the many generations that have come before us, but far too often I think the church confuses tradition with traditionalism. And what is the difference. Tradition says I have something to learn from those who have come before me, traditionalism says I have nothing to learn from those who have come after me. Tradition says the bible and commentaries and theological reflections we have from hundreds and even thousands of years ago are still relevant for this day and age. Traditionalism says who cares about this day and age, I want to pretend that I am living in a bygone era. Tradition says I love and respect the past and I want to learn both from the wisdom of the past and the mistakes of the past, traditionalism says I worship the past and people in the past didn't make any mistakes. And here's a quote that I love. Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. When

does traditionalism show up in the church? It shows up in a love of practices and programs that don't work anymore and that people long ago stopped being interested in but that no one wants to change because it's the way things have always been done. It shows up in a love of biblical plays and sermons with costumes and stories from the first century that take you back to ancient Palestine coupled with a belief that a play with modern dress or a sermon which tries to be relevant for this time somehow couldn't possibly be biblical. And it shows up in a belief that the solution to all the problems of the present comes in the form of going back to. We need to go back to the days when someone like so and so was the pastor. We need to go back to the days when so and so was the youth director. We need to go back to the days when we used to do this and that.

Well, maybe you say being stuck in the past and practicing this traditionalism is not so bad. A congregation that's stuck in the past is usually pretty certain not to attract a new generation of members, and that's not good, but I'm also aware that some congregations are so stuck in the past that they would rather die than do what it takes to attract a new generation of members, so that is no threat to them. But it may be news to you to know that a congregation which is stuck in the past can never be a Christian congregation, because people who are stuck in the past can never forgive. Now, I wonder if you've ever noticed that. Have you ever noticed that people who are living in the past and who are suspicious of anything new also can't forgive? You ever noticed that. They'll say don't ever trust Abigail because Abigail did such and such to me back in 1979. They keep replaying this old event over and over again in their minds like, well to use an image from the past, like a record that keep skipping over and over again, and they can't forgive because doesn't forgiveness mean that you have to let go of the past and

embrace the present. Isn't that what it means? And what's even worse is that they really can't ever be people who believe in the resurrection either. Because the resurrection assures us that death has no power over our Lord, and so if you are looking for God in an age that is dead and gone and among people who are dead and gone you are looking in the wrong place. Christ is risen not just on the pages of the bible, but right now. And by the way, the proclamation of this Easter Season is not he has risen or he was risen, it is he is risen. We speak in the present tense. Christ is not like Lazarus who was raised from the dead but who would one day die again, he is risen. And so if you are looking for him in the past, you are looking in the wrong place.

When I was in New York a friend of mine named Ken who was serving a church about twenty minutes down the road would sometime go visit a woman named Ruth who was a member of that church, but who was living in a nursing home. Now, you may be aware that when you are a pastor there are some people whom you'd better go visit as often as you can, because if you don't, everyone will hear about it, they will be on the phone to everyone in the church saying the pastor hasn't been over to see me in two months, and so the pastor will be in trouble, but Ruth was not that way. Ruth didn't have any friends left in the church; everyone she had ever known there had either moved away or had died. She didn't even have family that came to see her. Every now and then she would get a Christmas card or a birthday card from the church, but that was it. So one day shortly after he started working at this church, my friend Ken went to see her and that's when he learned Ruth's story about being forgotten. So Ken said "ma'am, how does that make you feel." And that's when Ruth said I feel like a copy of yesterday's paper that's been thrown out in the trash. I feel like a copy of yesterday's paper that's been thrown out in the trash. Now, isn't that the best description of being old and

forgotten that he had ever heard. You have a newspaper that sits fresh one morning in your mailbox or your front lawn, and for one day, for one moment in time it has something important to say and you pay attention to what it has to say as you read it from cover to cover. But then it lays around the house turning yellow with time and whatever it had to say has long ceased to be important and so you throw it out, you don't even think twice about throwing it out. You throw it out without a moment's hesitation.

I suppose behind every effort to hold on to the past, I suppose behind every effort to do what these disciples did in this story and gaze up in the sky still hanging on to a time that has passed, there is a fear that this present age doesn't care for me, and it just wants to throw me out in the garbage. It doesn't value me, it doesn't value what I have to say, I'm just like a yellowing copy of yesterday's paper. But don't believe that. The people who would throw you out just because you're a little older and maybe a little old fashioned are wrong. And don't take my word for it. It doesn't matter if I say they're wrong. God says they're wrong. The commandment to honor your father and mother doesn't just mean to say nice words to mom and dad, it means to honor and respect the generations that have come before you, and to value their wisdom. But God is also the God of the resurrection, God is also the God of forgiveness, so don't live in a time that is gone. Let it go. Like the Disney song says, Let it go.

I remember when my brother and I were kids my mom used to always say to us, we aren't promised tomorrow. Now I don't know what my brother thought about those words, but for my part I can tell you I never really thought about what that meant when I was a kid, and since I thought I was immortal as a kid, I think these words went in one ear and out the other. But now that I am older I think about these words a lot. We aren't promised tomorrow, and because we

aren't promised tomorrow that means each new day is a gift. The Psalmist says this is the day that the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it. Well, how on earth can you rejoice in the gift of today if you are living in a time that is no more. Honor the past, but don't live in it. Learn from the past, but don't hold on to it. Treasure your memories of the past, but let the past be past. Let it go. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.