

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 1, 2014
Ascension Sunday
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 110:1-5
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:49-53

Are you one of those people who do not like “goodbyes”? Saying goodbye can sometimes be a difficult and emotion-laden thing to do. Go to an airport and sit in an obscure chair and observe for a few minutes, and you’ll know what I mean.

Or watch persons from the armed forces as they prepare to board a ship and leave their families behind.

Saying goodbye is not easy.

Do you remember the first time you left home and said goodbye to your parents? Perhaps when you embarked for college, or were ready to be married, or were entering the service of your country.

And those of you who are parents, do you remember saying goodbye to your children when they left the nest to begin college or career or a new life somewhere else?

Saying goodbye is not easy. But we should remember that in all of these situations, saying goodbye can also be like saying hello. That is, the closing of one chapter in our lives makes possible the beginning of another chapter. Through the

sadness and bittersweet taste of goodbyes, relationships have a chance to grow and change and evolve to another level. In a sense, those relationships become something new by ceasing to be what they were before.

To gain by losing. To hold fast by letting go. To become something new by ceasing to be what we were before. These truths are at the heart of the Gospel. And perhaps nowhere is this more true than in the story of Christ's ascension.

Jesus spoke often to his disciples about the fact that he would leave them. But they treasured his presence so much that they couldn't imagine his departure. This final "goodbye", then, was one of the most difficult lessons they learned. For when he left them, he would never again be with them in the same, recognizable way.

But Jesus' "goodbye" to the disciples -- bittersweet though it was -- was in a sense also a saying "hello," for this special relationship they enjoyed took on a new character and shape.

On the one hand, the disciples had to say good bye to the Christ who was *before* them and *beside* them. And it's very hard for us to comprehend how difficult this must have been. They have rubbed shoulders with the divine, with the very Son of God. They have seen him do amazing things right before their very eyes. They have walked with him, and talked with him, and known him in a way we could never imagine.

No doubt saying goodbye to Jesus was hard. And maybe this is why much of the New Testament is preoccupied with looking for Jesus' imminent return once he ascended. After all, when you've spent so much time with Jesus *before* you and *beside* you, it's natural to want him back before you and beside you after he is gone.

But saying goodbye to the Christ who was *before* them and *beside* them made it possible for the disciples to say hello to the Christ who was to come to dwell *within* them through the power of the Spirit filling the Church. And in time, it dawned on the disciples that the divine presence for which they were waiting was already with them. They had inherited Christ's mission, and with his ascension to glory his power was now with them. Saying goodbye had made possible a new "hello."

Goodbyes are bittersweet for us also, which is why the Ascension story is something we should ponder often. Our lives are full of "letting go's" and "beginning agains." This happens when we begin a new job. It happens when we graduate from school and transition to the next chapter in our lives.

But perhaps nowhere is this more true than when we lose a loved one. When we lose someone we love, there is an emptiness in our hearts.

So God sends his Holy Spirit, and we cling to the Church. God comforts us for present and past pain, and channels our sorrow into sincere prayers and

gracious acts. He gives us grace so that even these painful good-byes can be preparation for joyous “hellos” which will come in their appointed time.

Yes, saying good-bye can be difficult and bittersweet. But what is it, really, to say “goodbye”?

Centuries ago, English-speaking Christians parted by saying, “God be with ye.” In time, it became “God be w’ ye,” and then finally “Good-bye.”

Jesus’ ascension fills the phrase “goodbye” with the full power of its meaning. In his ascension, “Goodbye” truly means “God be with you.” It means that God *is with us*.

One day, perhaps sooner than we imagine, this same Jesus who said goodbye and rose into the clouds will return on the clouds with great glory. In that moment, every loss will be turned to gain, every rough place will be made smooth, every tear will be wiped dry, and justice will be done in all the earth.

In the meantime, let us resolve to be witnesses to his love and power. Let us throw our lot in with the people of God, the Church, and continue to explore this relationship which was made possible through the saying of a painful goodbye. And as we do, let us always remember our Lord’s words to his disciples: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.