

Sermon: It Started with the Little Ones
Text: Acts 1:1-9
Date: May 13, 2018
Context: WWPC
Youth Sunday
Mother's Day Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up,
and a cloud took him out of their sight.*

Acts 1:9

Four gospel writers -- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John -- have given us their version of the story of the birth, life and ministry of Jesus. Of these four, only one of them, Luke, gave us a sequel.

To the uninitiated, the story of the birth, life and ministry of the early church might sound rather boring by comparison to its predecessor. But it is in fact a rip-roaring tale. And it starts out with a whopper of a scene.

And I mean that in the way it sounds. It opens with a scene that to many modern ears may be a little hard to believe. But then, given that his gospel culminates with the resurrection, Luke is accustomed to writing such scenes.

At the very start of the Book of Acts the disciples don't know that their lives are about to radically change, again.

But Jesus knows. He is brightly aware that his time on earth is just minutes away from drawing to a close. We know this because he gives his disciples one last promise:

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.'

Then, with that final promise, that final charge, delivered, whoooooosh, he starts to float upward toward the heavens, and he just keeps floating, up and up, until he disappears into the clouds, never to be seen by the disciples again.

If you're thinking that Luke's solution to the problem of how Jesus exits this story has an almost childish ring to it, you're not alone.

What, Jesus just floats away, like he's one of those helium filled weather balloons? Where does he go exactly? Into outer space? Does he cross some unseen membrane that divides this realm from the heavenly realm?

It's okay if you feel like this scene stretches credulity a little bit. Because even if the specifics of Jesus's leave-taking sound a little fanciful, you know this tale is true.

This same story --- or at least a version of it -- lies at the heart of every hero's journey. It's an archetypal tale that appears in myths and legends all over the world, in all sorts of cultural and religious contexts.

At their heart, these stories are all the same. They describe that moment when the hero steps out of the story, and their followers are left to fend for themselves.

Think about that moment when Obi-wan pulls his light saber to his chest just as Darth Vader slices through Obi-wan's suddenly empty robe.

Or when Gandalf appears to fall to his death, as Frodo, Sam and company pass over a dangerous bridge on their way to destroy the Ring.

I am not trying to reduce the scriptural record to mere myth, or to equate the truth of the Bible with the truth of *The Lord of the Rings*. But I am saying that for this next chapter of the biblical story to unfold, Jesus had to take his leave.

Not for his sake, mind you. But for the disciples' sake.

Every teacher and every mentor knows what every parent knows: ultimately, the only way for the student, or the child, to fully become himself, the only way she can realize her full potential, is if you step away and let them meet life on their own terms and deal with its challenges for themselves.

What's so hilarious about this scene is that before Jesus is even an inch off the ground, the disciples make their first mistake:

Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel? they ask.

The question draws a sharp rebuke from Jesus, I suspect because that's what he's been trying to do, and trying to show, for the last three years: that the Kingdom has already been restored. It's just that God's realm looks different than the earthly kingdom they were expecting.

It was such a new thing that Jesus was doing, such a new message he was teaching, such a new type of reign he was trying to inaugurate, that you can understand why the disciples were slow to catch on in the early stages--healing on the Sabbath, touching the unclean and the like. Startling, yes, just not yet revelatory.

But you'd think the light might have dawned for them on that day when Jesus welcomed the little children to come to him.

You remember the story...some parents bring their children to Jesus. Luke tells us that some people even brought little babies.

Apparently they want this wonder-worker to lay his hands on their kids and bless them. But the disciples get all indignant and try to drive both the parents and the children away.

Nowadays it's hard to imagine why anyone would do such a thing. How hardhearted do you have to be to want to keep children from being blessed?

If you've seen the focused look on Cadence's or Evva's or Lizzy's or Steven's face as they carry in the light of Christ to start our service, or the way Evan or Samuel or Hythe sometimes race down the aisle to hear the children's message, or have heard the insightful answers Anne or Tess often give to the questions Grace and I ask during the children's time, or have watched Allee dance the light of resurrection down the center aisle on Easter Sunday, or been hugged around the knees by Gretchen or Caroline, or watched how the children celebrated Harriot's arrival and welcomed Izzy into their circle...

If you've seen or experienced any of that, you probably think, as I do, well, as long as there are kids like that out there, there is hope for the world. Their love and their joy paint a living picture of the kind of future in which we all want to live.

But in Jesus's time children were not viewed that way. I'm sure they were loved individually, and especially by their parents. That's why the parents brought their kids to be blessed by Jesus.

But society as a whole did not value children. They were not even considered fully human. Kind of a cross between a costly burden and a necessary obligation to keep the clan or tribe alive through time.

But of course that's not how Jesus saw them.

Let the little children come to me he says to his disciples. *I'm going to redraw the boundaries of who is included in the circle of God's love, and I'm going to redefine what it means to be human, so that everyone is included, and I'm going to start with the littlest ones, literally the very least among us.*

The disciples wanted God's kingdom to be about something else. Something other than welcoming the least, cause that could include *anybody*. Something safer maybe, perhaps a smaller circle. They wanted it to be about tribe. About national identity.

Now, at the end, they still want it to be about that. *Is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*

But again, no. Jesus is having none of it.

You don't just get to hang out here with people who look like you, and think like you, and believe everything you believe. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

You will go where you've never been before. And you will love people you've never seen before, with whom you have no customs or traditions in common, people you once might have thought were unclean.

You might well wonder, why is this the very last thing Jesus tells them? The very last thing he expects them to do?

Sure, part of reason was to spread the Good News of his teachings, the Good News of God's love, to parts of the world where such love was not known.

But I wonder if another part of it had to do with the disciples, and with the effect this effort would have on them.

In his book, *Strength to Love*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed that “one of the great tragedies of man’s long trek along the highway of history has been the limiting of neighborly concern to tribe, race, class, or nation. The God of the early Old Testament was a tribal god and the ethic was tribal. The consequence of this narrow, group-centered attitude is that no one really minds what happens to those outside of his or her group. If an American is concerned only about his nation, he will not be concerned about the peoples of Asia, Africa or South America.” (*Strength to Love*, pg. 27-28.)

God’s one great dream for humanity is that, despite our astonishing diversity, we would be one.

The problem with tribalism is that it is at odds with that dream, because it sees diversity as a threat.

You will be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, not just for their sake but for yours. Because it’s hard to demonize people you know.

When you realize they love their children and would die for them in the same way you love your children and would die for them, you can’t hate them any longer.

When a spear tears through their tent, or a piece of shrapnel explodes through the thin wall of their home, and you see them bleed, just like you did, when that shrapnel smashed through the wall of your home, you can’t stay angry at them.

When their mother dies and they mourn just like you did when your mother died, you realize their heart is made out of the very same stuff as your heart.

The generic word for this kind of human connection is kinship. The realization that underneath our differences, we are sisters and brothers.

And Father Greg Boyle has made a ministry out of cultivating it.

Father Boyle is the founder of Homeboy Industries--the largest ministry in the country focused on helping gang members escape the gang life.

Except that he doesn't help member of just one gang leave that life behind. There are more than a thousand gangs in LA and Homebody Industries is prepared to help members of all the gangs

The Crips and Bloods, the Sureños, yes, MS-13. In Biblical terms it's not so much that Father Boyle sends workers out to Judea and Samaria. It's more that Judea and Samaria come to him.

His strategy is simple. He takes young men and women who are enemies out on the streets, and he puts them together, in the same room, working side by side.

As he tells it, new arrivals are usually willing to work together, but they're also very clear: they're not going to talk to each other.*

So one day, and I'm just going to tell this story the way he tells it, one day he brought Youngster into his factory. Youngster, that was his name. A little tiny guy.

So he brings him into the Homeboy factory where they make silkscreens for t-shirts. And he introduces him to the thirty or so guys who work there. Youngster shakes hands with all of them, and looks them in the eye, until he gets to the very last guy, a guy named Puppet.

They don't shake hands. They don't make eye contact. They are obviously very suspicious of each other.

Father Boyle does not yet know why this is. He only says, look, if you guys can't work together, let me know, I've got lots of other guys who would love to have your jobs.

He learns later that Youngster and Puppet hate each other, and their hatred is personal and deep.

But while they're on the job, they manage to put that hatred aside. At least that's what they do at the start.

Six months later, Puppet goes out and makes a run to the market to pick up some stuff.

On his way back, he takes a shortcut through an alley. He's jumped by a bunch of rival of gang members. They beat him until he falls to the ground. When he's down, they start kicking him. And they don't stop until their terrible, demonic work is done.

Puppet dies on the spot but an ambulance comes and takes him to a hospital where he can be formally pronounced. Father Boyle comes in to anoint Puppet's head with oil and to bless his lifeless body. And then a few days later, he buries him.

A few days after that, Father Boyle's phone rings. It's Youngster--the tiny guy from the silkscreen factory who wouldn't shake hands with Puppet on his first day.

"That's messed up what happened to Puppet," Youngster declares.

"Yeah, it is," Father Boyle replies.

"Is there anything I can do? Can I give him my blood?" Can I give him my blood.

But there is nothing Youngster can do for Puppet now, so Father Boyle says nothing.

"He was not my enemy. He was my friend. We worked together."

God's deepest longing is that despite our astonishing diversity, we would be one human family.

So 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.'

* Father Boyle tells the above story in here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipR0kWt1Fkc