

**Acts 1: 1-11**  
**Luke 24: 44-53**  
**May 13, 2018**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

Back in the days when airports had open air observation decks, a person could put a dime into a slot and push through a stile and ascend steps onto a flat roof to watch planes land and take off and to watch passengers board and deplane. This was especially exciting at Christmas when grandparents would arrive from far away Boston or New York. As a dot appeared from the sky and grew in size and as the saw-like buzz of the propellers grew louder, my sister and I would wonder, "Is this the one?" Soon we would be able to see the emblem of the airline and wait breathlessly for the plane which carried Nanna and Grandi or Boo and Grumps safely to land. We would scan the passengers as they made their way down the ramped up stairway to the tarmac until we saw the familiar faces that would wave at us. Then we would scamper down to join our parents to welcome our grandparents. Christmas had begun.

Yet in almost no time the process was reversed. The grandparents would be packed up and we would return to the airport. The feeling was one of sadness. The much anticipated visit was over. Christmas was over. We would return to a house full of the absence of grandparents. The time we had so much anticipated was over. In a few days we would return to school and what felt like empty ordinary time.

Saying goodbye at the gate my sister and I would make our way to the observation deck and bravely wave as our grandparents left the gate and disappeared into the passenger cabin of the plane. We would hope that they had seats on our side of the plane. And sometimes we

were rewarded by a shadowy face and a hand waving from a window. Then with a loud cough the propeller engines would kick into action and with increasing velocity reach such speed of revolutions that you could see right through to the body of the plane. The chocks would be removed from the wheels and slowly the plane would make its way toward the end of the airfield from where it would slowly lumber down the runway gathering speed until it would miraculously lift off the ground and ascend to the sky. With eyes riveted my sister and I would follow the plane until, as it had done a week earlier, became a dot in the sky. Even then we continued to stare, not being sure if the dot we were seeing was not in fact some bird gliding among the clouds. Somehow, we believed, if we could still see the plane—even in our mind's eye—we had connection with the ones we loved. Soon our father's voice would break into our trance and say something like, "Time to go home."

Oh, what a painful moment! To peel our eyes away from the last place we had seen the airplane disappear was so hard! It meant that we had to admit that our grandparents were gone.

I always return to this childhood memory when I hear the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven. For forty days the disciples have had their teacher returned to them from the dead. On one level they know that he will not remain with them. After all, as John recorded, Jesus said, "Unless I go away the Comforter cannot come." Yet just as they had heard Jesus speak of his death and resurrection, the moment of Jesus' departure fell on uncomprehending ears. Today we would call it simply, denial.

And so the day comes when he leads the eleven disciples up the Mount of Olives to a place near Bethany. This is the home of Mary and Martha and the place where Jesus raised

Lazarus from the dead. As he did with the travelers on the road to Emmaus, Jesus opens up the scriptures, filling their hearts and minds with the meaning of the sacred texts as only he could. As it had on the mount of Transfiguration a cloud descends, only this time when it lifts Jesus rises with it.

What a gut wrenching experience this must have been! It must have felt like suddenly the future was an empty void. What future could there be without the physical presence of their Lord and teacher? Yes, Jesus had spoken about their becoming witnesses empowered by the Holy Spirit. But in the face of the gradually rising and diminishing figure of Jesus all they could experience was the emptiness of life without him. I imagine that, like two children trying to keep eye contact with the airplane carrying their grandparents away, the disciples strained their eyes tracking the retreating form trying to keep connection.

Then come the voices, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking up toward heaven?" It is time to admit that Jesus is gone. It is then that the disciples make a profound move of faith: they take their eyes off of the sky and turn back toward Jerusalem.

Friends, today this story hits pretty close to home for me and perhaps for you. We are preparing for that moment when our partnership in ministry will come to an end. Such is our life together that for you and for MJ and me this is a time of mutual awareness that something that has been so precious and meaningful is drawing to a close. In our own ways, we will be tempted to focus on upon and want to hold onto what has been. For all of us there will come the voice which bids us to turn and begin new chapters in ministry. Talking about it now will, I hope, make it easier when the time arrives. Not *easy*, mind you. Just *easier*.

The time is coming when we will go to our respective “Jeruselems” and await the power of the Holy Spirit to open our hearts to the path ahead. It will be the same Holy Spirit which brought us together thirteen years ago and which has guided us through ups and downs to today. It is the same Holy Spirit which has called together a team to seek an interim pastor and in time one to seek a new called pastor.

I urge you, as I urge myself, to with the disciples when they are called by heaven to release their eyes on the past and turn to the blessing to come. For this is our moment in time when we turn away from what has been and *toward the joy of what is to come.*

After all, Luke does not say that the disciples sadly trudged back down the Mount of Olives and sat gloomily together. Luke says that they returned to Jerusalem in great joy and gathered together, with the women disciples. They gathered in the temple devoting themselves to prayer and continually praising God. They actively waited what God would do next.

May it be so of us! Amen.