

## **“You Say Goodbye, and I Say Hello”**

Date: June 5, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

Theme: Ascension, presence of Christ, communion, graduates

Occasion: Ascension Sunday

Those of you of a certain age will recognize the sermon title as a line from a well-known Beatles song. Those of you of a younger age, the Beatles were a singing group in the 1960's. “You say goodbye, and I say hello.”

Saying “goodbye” can be hard. Goodbyes can be sad. But sometimes, goodbye can be good. Because sometimes goodbye is like hello.

Those of us who are raising children understand the concept well. At various stages in our children’s growth we’ve had to say goodbye. We bundle them up and send the kids off to school, or to camp for the first time. Mothers cry. Fathers hide it. We’re going to miss them. We’re anxious about their safety.

But in saying goodbye to our young children, we are actually saying hello to the grown-up person they will become. Today we recognize our graduates. Twelve or thirteen years ago when your parents sent you off to first grade or kindergarten, they anticipated your graduation. Goodbye little one, hello young adult.

As our graduates say goodbye to their high school friends, they also have the exciting privilege of saying hello to new friends - at college in the fall, or at a new job if they decide to work instead. As you say goodbye to the drama of high school, you get to say hello to a new chapter in your life, as new worlds open up to you.

At some point, parents, we say goodbye to our little ones for the last time, because they will never be little boys and little girls again. We send young ones off to boot camp and they return, no longer children, but grown men and women. We drop them off at the college dorm at the end of a summer, and never again will they

be our little babies. They're turning into adults. Goodbye means hello.

One goodbye makes another hello possible. To gain by losing. To hold fast, by letting go. To become something new, by ceasing to be what we were before. These are the truths at the core of the Gospel. And nowhere is this clearer than in the story of Christ's ascension into Heaven.

Jesus spoke to the disciples about his eventual departure from them. But, like us, it was hard for them to say goodbye. They treasured his presence so much, they could not even imagine what it would be like if he were gone. In John 14, Jesus spoke these words: "Where I am going, you cannot come. In a little while you will see me, and then a little while and you will not see me. I am going to prepare a place for you."

He was talking about his crucifixion. *That's* how Jesus prepared a place for us in Heaven. By dying on a cross, bleeding until he suffocated to death. His disciples were not prepared for this. But even after Easter, even after He rose from the grave, His presence was a mystery to them. It was never again the way it used to be. In the resurrection he appears, then he disappears. They recognize him, and then they don't.

And then, there came a time when he would be with them only one more time.

This time, when he departed, he would never be with them in the same way again. Luke writes about this transition in both his own Gospel and in the book of Acts, which he also wrote. We refer to this event as The Ascension.

Luke was trying to convey to the world how things were different now. Different from the way things were after the resurrection. The risen Christ was no longer bodily with them, to laugh and to eat and to teach as he once did. Christ had

returned to his divine glory. “Up” was the only way they could describe it. So we call it the ascension. He ascended into Heaven.

Some people wonder about the mechanics of the ascension. Was Jesus the first astronaut; did he actually lift off the ground? Was the last view of Jesus the bottom of his feet, as he disappeared into the clouds? Guess what. The Bible tells us nothing about the ballistics of the ascension. Because *how* Jesus ascended to Heaven is unimportant. What is important is that He has now returned to the Father, seated in glory.

The disciples had to say goodbye to the man Jesus and his physical body. But guess what. Because Jesus could no longer be with us in bodily form, He sent us His Holy Spirit, to help us carry on his work and ministry. Goodbye means hello. Goodbye Jesus. Hello Holy Spirit.

Jesus, the man, is gone from our midst. No matter how much we would like to see and actually talk to a man with a physical body, *that* man is gone. **Goodbye.** But he gives us the Holy Spirit. **Hello.**

The Ascension stands as a line of demarcation, marking the end of the time when Jesus was present, and the beginning of the time when the disciples would now carry on his work - teaching and healing and telling others about God’s love.

Just after the Ascension, the disciples are standing around, looking up and wondering what just happened. Suddenly two angels appeared and asked them a question. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking into Heaven?”

Almost as if to say, “What’s the big deal. He came from Heaven and He returned to Heaven, and He’ll come back in glory. But come on now, until Christ returns in glory, you need to get on with the work He has given you to do.”

And so, for all of its mystery and wonder, the Ascension is still quite

practical. Jesus is gone. Now, its up to us, His followers, to carry on His ministry. “But wait,” you might say. “How can *we* do the work that Jesus did? We’re not the Son of God.”

No, we’re not the Savior of the world; there was only one Messiah.

But *our* work is to point others to Him. And Jesus promised that He would not leave us alone. Jesus promised that He would send his Holy Spirit, to guide and to lead us and to give us power. But that is the story for next Sunday, when we celebrate Pentecost.

Sometimes goodbye means hello. We say goodbye to Jesus in the flesh, and we say hello to Jesus in the Spirit. But wouldn’t it be nice to feel His presence, to feel his closeness once again? Wouldn’t it be special to be with Jesus?

Jesus understood our need for Presence. And so Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion. It is true that Jesus cannot be with us in the physicality of a human body. But when we take this bread and drink this juice, it is as close as we can come to being with Him. “This is my body. This my blood. Remember me.”

Jesus invites us not only to remember, but to commune with Him. To take Him into our bodies and into our hearts. To be with Him and allow Him to be with us. He is the vine and we are the branches. If we are to live and thrive as Christians, we must abide in Him.

Jesus is gone from the earth. “You say goodbye.” But Jesus is with us in the Spirit. “He says Hello.” He is with us when two or three are gathered in His name; He is with us when we pray; and He is with us when we celebrate the sacrament.

I can almost hear Jesus singing that Beatle song: “I say hello. I don’t know why you say goodbye, I say hello.” My friends, as Jesus was lifted up into Heaven

at His Ascension, may we lift Him up always, in word and in deed, so that the world might believe. Amen? Amen!