

You Will Be My Witnesses
 Acts 1:1-11
 June 5, 2011
 Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

I've been saving Harold Camping for today because this is Ascension Sunday. You maybe wondered why I didn't preach yet about the rapture? Harold Camping was very sure that on May 21st, a worldwide earthquake would strike. Those of us who would be saved would be lifted up and swooped away. (I guess I figured I'd be around after May 21, and there would still be time to talk about this, at least now we have until Oct. 21, the new rapture date.) An interviewer for New York Magazine asked Camping some interesting questions:

Who gets to ascend to heaven?

Those who accept Christ as the messiah. Even Jews are invited, says Camping, but only if they accept Christ—which would seem to make them no longer Jewish.

"How many would be raptured?" Camping estimated 200 million. The remaining nearly 7 billion faced a grisly fate—to be crushed in the quake, burned by sulfur, turned into pillars of salt, things like that.

"Why May 21st?" Why, that was exactly 7,000 years from the date of the Noah's Ark flood. In his book *Time Has an End*, Camping writes. "The year 391 B.C. is the year when the Old Testament was finished, and $2,011 + 391 - 1 = 2,401$, or $7 \times 7 \times 7 \times 7$." There you have it.

(I love this one.) **"If I'm raptured, what will happen to my pets?"** Probably nothing good. However, a business called Eternal Earthbound Pets run by "confirmed atheists" offered to save pets left behind and ensure their care in 26 states. It lists a fee of \$135 for a single pet (\$20 for each additional pet). Pets are limited to dogs, cats, birds, rabbits and small caged mammals in most states. Four states can accommodate horses, camels, llamas and donkeys (http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/hottopics/detail?entry_id=89183#ixzz1NzI50LyZ).

Well, the end didn't come! Most never believed in the rapture, anyway. But why such a fascination with the end times and Judgment Day? The people who believe in the rapture seem to be so sure *they* will be included—that they are better than those left behind. It is an exclusionary idea—one that judges and one that is indeed a false prophesy.

Jesus' ascension is another matter all together. It is a story in the Bible that depicts Jesus' appearance 40 days after his resurrection and then his disappearance. You may not believe in a literal appearance and ascension, but all Christians generally believe in the relationship of Jesus with his disciples and the message he left with them. Somehow the physical relationship ended, but the message was passed on. This is what Ascension Day is about.

If you were an artist, how would you illustrate disappearance? Presto, nothing! For thousand of years, painters have been trying to capture the essence of the ascension, and many ascension paintings hang in art museums around the world. Jesus "was taken up to heaven," (v. 2) it says in the first lines of the Book of Acts. "He was lifted up, and a cloud

took him out of their sight" (v. 9).

One painting by a 16th-century Italian painter named Titian is called "Noli me tangere," literally, "Don't touch me." Jesus is leaving Mary Magdalene and telling her not to hold on to him. This is the ascension from the point of view of parting, leaving one world, going to another—"Don't go! Don't leave me!" And Jesus says—"I have to go! Don't touch me!" This is the relational ascension, the one with pathos. It's the **before-ascension** picture.

Albrecht Dürer has a woodcut called "The Ascension of Christ." It's in black and white, with the disciples all gathered around, as in a huddle, but looking up. You can't see Jesus, except for his feet and the hem of his robe at the very top of the print, as Jesus ascends in a cloud. It's like, ...going, going, gone! This is the **during-ascension** picture.

And then many paintings seem to be able only to capture the result of the ascension: the **after-ascension** picture. Jesus is up in the sky, compartmentalized in a golden box with angels and a throne. And way down below in another box are the remaining followers standing about, looking in all different directions, unsure what to do next. It's a done deal. Now what?

We want to imagine with our eyes what happened, where Jesus went, when he disappeared.

Others are less visual, but more aural. "What did he say?" they want to know. "What were his last words?" This oral history we have in the Bible. The ascension is spoken of or depicted in all the Gospels and in Acts.

Mark, the earliest Gospel written, has a first ending that concludes with the resurrection, then a second ending that was added later gives Jesus' words: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). And then he ascended. That's the **"good news"** version.

In Luke, Jesus says, "Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). And then he was carried up into heaven. That's the **"power"** version.

In Matthew, Jesus has told the followers to go on to Galilee, so the ascension happens there, not in Jerusalem. They go up a mountain, and Jesus appears to them saying, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit....And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age." These words we call the Great Commission, and they are our basis for baptism. That's the **"go therefore"** version....

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' last words are "Feed my sheep," and **"Follow me!"** (I don't think he means up into the sky.)

And in the Book of Acts, which continues on to tell about the early church, Jesus says, **"You will be my witnesses."**

So if we put this all together, and listen to these words of Jesus about "good news," "power from on high," "go therefore and make disciples," and "follow me," I think we have a definition of what Jesus may have meant when he said, "You will be my witnesses."

In *The Message*, a paraphrased Bible by Eugene Peterson, the phrase is "You will be able to be my witnesses." You will be able to be my witnesses *because* this good news that I have been telling you about and the power that you will receive will allow you, in fact propel you, to go into the world and do what I have asked, which is to feed my people and follow me—which is all about keeping the commandments to love God and neighbor.

In *The Message*, the passage goes on to say, "Why do you just stand there looking at an empty sky?"

If you are attending a graduation this year, you'll undoubtedly hear a speech that urges graduates to "follow your dreams," "be all that you can be," "find joy—the sky is the limit!" (Off you go, up, up, and away!) But in a column entitled "Some final advice: It's not about you," David Brooks gives a different message to our graduates. He reminds us that most young people won't achieve success by following their dreams. (They don't even know what their dreams are.) "Most people don't form a self and then lead a life," he says. In many cases, a problem calls to them, and the self forms gradually in response to that call. "A relative suffers from Alzheimer's and a young woman feels called to help cure that disease. A young man works for a miserable boss and must develop management skills so his department can function [in spite of his boss]" (*Press Democrat*, June 1, 2011, B5). A young person happens to land a job and then finds out how rewarding the work is and so gets further training to continue in that work. It's about giving to something greater than oneself. It's about losing oneself to find oneself.

The graduation speakers last weekend at Sonoma State seem to have figured this out. Nathaniel Garrod graduated in English. When Nathaniel was 14, his single mother died of breast cancer. He went to live at Hanna Boys Center, a residential treatment center for at-risk boys in Sonoma. About 100 boys ages 13-18 live at Hanna in cottages, a big dining room for everybody and special classes, one teacher to 8 boys, typically. Hanna was a good place for Nathaniel. He graduated from high school and then attended SSU. He figured out how to seek out mentors and learn from others all along the way. Now he is going on to graduate school at Oklahoma State University. The motto of Hanna Boys Center is "faith, education, and caring" (<http://www.sonomanews.com/News-2011/How-Hanna-changed-my-life/>). These words seem to be at the core of who Nathaniel Garrod is.

The other graduation speaker was Daisy Meyer. She graduated as an environmental studies major. She is applying for the Peace Corps. She wants to work in the out-of-doors and help people. Her advice for incoming freshmen is simple. "Try something. There's no harm in trying something new, and then you'll want to try everything. Start with anything," she says (<http://www.sonoma.edu/newscenter/2011/05/daisy-meyer.html>).

These young people don't have everything figured out, but they are appreciative of what

they've learned and the opportunities they've had. And they are eager to keep learning and keep giving back.

Isn't this the way our faith works? We don't know what the journey promises, but if we remain faithful to our call to be witnesses to the love of God made tangible in human relationships, we will find avenues of service. Our lives will be fulfilling and have meaning. It's not about *you*! It is about being a witness of *him*—a witness of him who came to give us direction in life—not up, up, and away in some promised rapture, but out, out, and out into the world—in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and in Rohnert Park, and to the ends of the earth! It's not about the end time; it's about the start time, right now.

This is the calling into which we have been baptized. This is the calling we embrace as members of The United Methodist Church when we promise our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. The calling is to be his witnesses—to lose ourselves to find ourselves.