

While We're Waiting

A while ago there was a podcast called Invisibilia, where they had an episode called “I,I,I, Him” which looked at the experiences of people who had endured the loss of a person or thing that was crucial to their understanding of who they were. One of the stories in the episode is about the mother of the host, Hanna Rosen, after Rosen’s father died unexpectedly from a brutal and brief illness.

Hanna shared that, in the wake of her father’s death, her mother was utterly undone. They had been married for 51 years. They did everything together – ate breakfast, went for walks through town, visited with their grandchildren. For Hannah’s mother, all of those ordinary, familiar life things had become unfamiliar in her husband’s absence. Performing them without him felt to her like a betrayal. In the midst of her deep well of grief and bewilderment, Hanna’s mother began speaking of a surprising plan. She wanted to jump out of an airplane.

Hanna explained to the podcast audience that her mother is decidedly not an adventurer or a risk taker. Never had been. Jumping out of a plane is so far off her mother’s personality radar, that it’s alarming. It almost seems like a death wish. Eventually, Hanna learns why her mother wants to jump. She explains that while she’s up there, a stone’s throw from Heaven, she hopes to catch a glimpse of her husband, to tell him goodbye and that she will see him soon.

Hanna’s mother can’t stop thinking about ways to reconnect with her dead husband, even if only for a moment. She is consumed. She needs some way – some drastic way – to reckon with the ending she has experienced so that she can move on to whatever comes next.

The question for us today is: When the thing that defines your world disappears, how do you find your way out of your old story and into a new one?

This is the question Hanna Rosen offers up about her mom. But it could also be asked about the disciples on Ascension Day.

Jesus is blessing his dearest friends and followers. He tells them to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of God, that is, the Holy Spirit who will come on Pentecost and then tells them to go out into the world and proclaim repentance and forgiveness in his name to all nations, to the ends of the earth.

And then, while he is still speaking, still blessing them and offering guidance and farewells – he is lifted up into Heaven and disappears.

I imagine this moment vividly, like a scene in a movie. The camera is tight around Jesus and his ragtag and worn out group of friends, and the music swells to a grand crescendo as he raises up and disappears.

And then we see close ups of the disciples' weathered faces. Their expressions of grief, and awe and wonder, and loss, and desperation as they keep looking up at where the man they love has gone away.

The scene continues past the expected several long, meaningful beats of the music until it grows a little uncomfortable. In my imagination, the audience watching this on screen is growing restless....what comes next? And then the camera slowly pans out. And there, standing just feet away from the dumbstruck disciples, are two random men in white who have evidently been watching them staring up at the sky for who knows how long. I picture the strangers with amused and exasperated expressions, as they finally speak, startling Jesus' friends and followers from their trance.

"Seriously" they say. "He's gone. Why are you still staring up at the sky? He will come back like he told you, just like he went away like he told you. It's no use staring slack-jawed at the heavens until then. Move on!"

The thing that makes this story and scene a little awkward, is that it's really two stories. Or at least, it's the ending of one story, and then the waiting for the next story to begin.

We don't talk a lot about the Ascension in our church. It's stuck in between 2 Sundays in our liturgical calendar, and just a week and a half before Pentecost which we celebrate as the culmination of the Easter season and the true beginning of the church. For many of us, the Ascension of Christ gets only a passing mention, maybe a secondary scripture or just a reference point in a Pentecost sermon.

And, on the one hand, that seems a little strange given that it is literally the final moment of Jesus' earthly life, he who is the center of our entire faith. For this reason, you would think it might be a bigger deal.

On the other hand, it's not all that surprising that we overlook it. It is, essentially, the final act of Jesus' life story. We've had the rising action, the conflict, the climax, the falling action and we've arrived at the point in the story that is meant to tie up loose ends, wrap up final details and close the book. What begins in the final scene, is a murky, in-between, uncertain time that doesn't fit into any story at all.

Traditionally, on the 40th day after Easter, the church celebrates the feast of the Ascension. But because so few people in the 21st century are willing to come to church during the week, the Ascension is celebrated by the church on the first Sunday after the feast of the Ascension.

Now if you have ever read anything by Bishop Spong, you will know that he has been anti-Ascension. Bishop Spong actually had a conversation about the Ascension with world renowned astronomer and astrophysicist Carl Sagan. And Carl Sagan told him "if Jesus literally ascended into the sky and traveled at the speed of light, then he hasn't yet escaped our galaxy."

The important question for most biblical scholars is not whether the Ascension actually happened but rather, what did the Ascension mean to the author in his context. And to that question we might add a more pressing question. Given what the Ascension meant in the first century, does it continue to have any relevance for those of us who live in the 21st century?

I believe that the followers of Jesus were so overwhelmed that they saw in him the human face of God. I also believe that in very powerful ways, the followers of Jesus continued to experience Jesus' presence. Those powerful experiences of Jesus after his death were so intense that they defied description.

By the time the writer of Luke and Acts got around to writing these stories down, there were different versions of the story being passed around in the early church. The writer of Luke and Acts paints a picture of a re-formed bodily Jesus going up into the heavens in the Ascension and a windy, fiery Spirit coming down at Pentecost. But this story is there for a reason and we need to look at what the reason is, that the author wanted this story written in the first place.

With our biblical canon hindsight, we generally consider the next chapter as beginning with Pentecost. So there are 10 days to go. Here in this scripture's final verses, the disciples – and we are with them – find ourselves in a sort of narrative no man's land the in-between time of the before and after.

And of course, there's the fact that the disciples don't have the benefit of hindsight. They don't have the luxury of a well constructed, time-tested New Testament that tells them what part of the story they're in, or whatever comes next. They have the promise of something coming – a promise that, for all the proof and reassurance they've seen in Jesus in recent days – is still just a disembodied hope.

And then, they have this ending. This overwhelming ending. The loss of this person who defined their whole world. And it's a loss further compounded and confused, no doubt, because it's happened before. They have lost Jesus once already. They watched him die a gruesome death. They saw his body go limp, his eyes go dull. For three days they descended into the depths of their grief.

And then, just when it seemed the story was over, he returned to them, alive. And here is he gone again, but promising another return.

They ask him when and are reminded, firmly, that the time of God's kingdom is not for them to know.

I find that I can't really blame them for staring up into heaven – for allowing themselves to hope that if they stare up long enough, they'll never have to lay eyes on a world without him.

So here is that question again: “When the thing that defines your world disappears, how do you find your way out of your old story and into a new one?”

“After” is a hard place to be. We are not good, generally speaking, at after.

It is the moments and hours and days after a funeral, when the rituals of grief give way to whatever undetermined thing is meant to follow. It is that strange, hollow, sadness when you’ve finished an absorbing book and aren’t yet ready to start a new one. It is that weird week between Christmas and New Years.

Our books and movies and stories define life and experience for us as something with a clear beginning, middle and end. They don’t prepare us for what happens after the ending. Or between the ending and the next beginning. The part where there’s no clear narrative outline, no God-in Human-form walking a step ahead of us, calming the storms and commanding us clearly in the face of each new situation that arises.

It is a murky, lost time that the disciples find themselves in here at the end of this passage. And so it is no wonder that we rush right past it. Skirting the edges of its uncertainty in favor of the new narrative structure that Pentecost brings.

Except here is the truth: so much of life and faith happens in the after, the before, the inbetween. The already but not yet. In fact, we exist entirely in such a space. Some are fond of saying that we are an Easter people in a Good Friday world. But we’re not. We are an Easter people in a post-Ascension world.

We have witnessed Resurrection, but we still suffer and die. God has come to us and for us but many days we still feel godforsaken. Forgiveness has been declared, but so much is still so very broken. We have seen a great light, but things can still seem so dark.

Christ has died. Christ has risen. And Christ will come again.....But not yet. So now what?

I feel this so much in these days. Maybe you do to.

As a pastor, I look at the world and the fight for justice even when so many days lately feel like it’s a lost cause. I struggle to stay motivated, hopeful, healthy. My job is to care for you, the church. To cultivate it, to grow it, to advocate for you and to minister to you. And so I pay attention to what matters to people. I listen, I read the news. I follow conversations on social media.

This can be a wonderful thing. It means having meaningful conversations and encounters with people whose lives have been touched by our work, who stand with us in the struggle. But it can also be really hard.

I read hate mail and angry comments and letters from people who feel hopeless and lost. I watch people tear one another apart, seek to decimate the God-image in others. I watch hate win over and over and over. And I feel so uncertain, some days, about what the right move is. About what comes next. And about what we and I should do.

I have caught myself, on more than one occasion, looking up to the heavens as if to say to God, “could you just get back down here already and fix this mess?”

I get these disciples. But the angels, the strangers, the dudes in white – have a message for me and for them and for all of us.

Stop stargazing and get about the work your God has given you. Jesus has told us that it is not for us to know when the kingdom comes.

But Jesus has also told us what is for us. To wait and trust deeply in the promise of God. To be comforted, inspired, and compelled by the Holy Spirit. In a post-Ascension world, we are commissioned not simply to follow Jesus. But to become his very body, his hands and feet in the world. And to go into the cities we come, from the towns we’ve never seen, in the land we call our own, and to every nook and cranny of this earth, right into the heart of brokenness and darkness and uncertainty and fear and to witness to the truth of who we know Christ to be in the embodiment of forgiveness and love and grace.

Here is how Hanna Rosen’s mother lives out her “after” – her “inbetween.”

She jumps out of the plane. She does, in fact, jump and she drags a loving but terrified Hanna with her. By the time the fateful day arrives, though, a shift has occurred in the grieving woman. One day, she wakes up and begins to think not of “I,I,I” – not of her own feelings and beliefs – but of “him” – of what her husband would want. She imagines how she would feel if their circumstances were reversed, and she realizes that she would want her husband to live and embrace life and to honor the best of them and of her. And she decides to do the same.

So she does jump. Not because she is desperate to hold on to her husband for as long as she can, to cling to another glimpse of him, if only for a moment. She jumps because, it turns out, long ago her husband had been a paratropper in the army. It was one part of his life that she did not share with him.

And now, with him gone, she is determined to embrace all that they shared and all that he was and to live it out. And so she is in the plane, high above the earth. Kissing heaven. And Hanna tells listeners that her mother’s face is so happy. And the instructors take it as evidence of how ready she is.

But Hanna sees a religious kind of joy. Her mother is saying over and over and over again. “I love you, I love you. I am doing this for you.” She is filled with love and life and the best of who her husband was, determined to descend from the heavens and bear it out into the world before.

And so she steps to the edge of the open airplane door, to whatever comes next, to that unknown holy in-between and – Hanna tell us – she doesn't look back.

As we approach the celebration of Pentecost, may we find in these stories handed down to us by our ancestors in the faith, an inkling of the powerful presence that Jesus' first followers experienced after Jesus had left them.

May we feel the joy they felt at the realization that the God they saw in Jesus they now found in themselves. May we experience what those first followers experienced in Jesus' departure, when they discovered they could love as extravagantly as Jesus did, that they could live as abundantly as Jesus did. That they could bring about healing and reconciliation just as Jesus did.

May these realizations live and breathe and have their being in you. May you know the joy of seeing Jesus point the way, the joy of finding God. May you know the God that Jesus points to that is everywhere, even in you. May you love extravagantly as Jesus loved. May you live as abundantly as Jesus lived.

May you be Christ's body here and now, in this place, in this time while we are waiting.

Amen.