

THE EYES OF YOUR HEART
Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton
May 4, 2008
Scripture: Ephesians 1:15-23 and
Luke 24: 44-53

We're not sure that Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians. And for that matter we're not even sure any more whether it was really to the Ephesians that the letter was written, but the sentiments and spirit of the letter have Pauline fingerprints on them, and the thoughts expressed are remarkable. One passage in the letter to the Ephesians that resonates in my heart and soul, is that passage assigned for Ascension Day, the one read a moment ago. It is a prayer offered for those early Christians, struggling in faith, desiring to live a life closer to God, and who were at times discouraged in their hope and unsure of their faith.

To these early Christians the writer offers this pastoral prayer which moves from intercession, to thanksgiving, to doxology. He writes, "I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power."

And it's that phrase about *the eyes of your heart enlightened* that so strikes me and stays with me and makes me wonder about its meaning.

The eyes of your heart... what a tantalizing phrase. Of course we know that the ancients identified parts of the body with certain humours and feelings. The mind was the seat of wisdom, the liver was the seat of emotion, the kidneys the seat of grief or joy, the bowels the seat of emotion, and the heart, well the heart was the place of yearning, the source of courage. Within the heart, faith dwells.

The prayer asks that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened. And more than we may be ready to acknowledge, we most of us do find our way through this life and in this world *with our heart* as much as our mind.

Of course, it's a rational life we live. We prize intellect and reward wisdom. Our college seniors are about to go forth into the world armed with a sheepskin that is the reward of their intellectual pursuits these past four years. Many of them will go on for more study. The bright and gifted person intellectually will earn more money in their lifetime, accomplish more, get a better job, because we value the smarts of the mind.

We should not, however, forget the importance of the wisdom of our heart in all of this. If the mind is the engine that drives us, it is still the heart that steers us. And some of the most important decisions and directions we will take in life will be ones guided by our heart every bit as much as our head. And maybe that's not such a bad thing.

It is, I think, why people in love get married without the slightest clue as to what the future will bring or what they will face together or how they will stand up to what is demanded of them. It is why someone leaves a lucrative job on Wall Street and enters the ministry, why a gay couple might find a birth surrogate, or a sperm donor, or adopt a child into their life together. It is why someone who comes from a modest and unimpressive background gets a vision of what they might be in life, and they hang onto that dream, and they work to attain it, and they one day achieve it, against all odds. It is because the eyes of our hearts are enlightened with faith, with a certain knowledge of the hope to which we are called.

It's not that reason and intellect and the rational are not important, it's just that we must not discount the importance of what the eyes of the heart may see, and the hope to which we may be called.

In the Lukan passage today, there is a story that is hard to understand intellectually, one that has always troubled me from the literal sense of it. It's the story of the Ascension, the departure of Jesus from the disciples on Mount Olivet, the last of Luke's post-resurrection appearances. And like all the resurrection accounts it is a story best apprehended by faith. It is a story that we can only see with the eyes of our heart enlightened.

Jesus preaches a brief sermon to the disciples about the necessity of the Messiah's suffering and dying and rising on the third day. It is the risen Lord preaching this sermon, and the disciples have been hidden away in Jerusalem until the right time... until, as we will discover next Sunday, the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to them and the church is empowered to go forth into all the world.

But before that happens there is this one piece of business that must transpire. Jesus must depart from his disciples. Luke tells us that he went out to Bethany with them, to that place where Mary and Martha lived, where Lazarus was raised from the dead, where the Mount of Olives was located, and Jesus stood before his disciples. He raised his hands and blessed them, like a pastor at the end of the service on a Sunday morning, blessing these, his closest lifetime friends, offering a parting prayer with these dear disciples who had meant so much to him. And as he did this, Luke says he "withdrew from them" and was "carried up into heaven."

The story of Jesus' earthly departure is one of those events in the gospels that is probably best described as a miracle, a sign pointing to Jesus' power and authority, an evidence of heaven touching earth.

But in truth, the mind struggles to comprehend such an occurrence. What does this story say to us about Jesus and his resurrected body? Was it insubstantial molecular structure? Smoke and mirrors? The overactive imagination of grieving disciples? Or was it simply a final miraculous event in an utterly miraculous sequence of events; a dreamy, gauzy filtering of light and air, the blending of spirit and matter, something that only the eyes of our heart can entertain.

It is not an easy story intellectually. I mean this is not the sort of thing that one experiences in life. We have no experience with this kind of thing, short of watching Star Trek and the teletransporter beaming people up and down from this place to that.

It's also not an easy story, because in a profoundly final sense this is the end. This is the last appearance of Jesus to his disciples on earth, and for all intents and purposes they are now on their own. There is the promise that there will be the coming of the Holy Spirit, and we can freeze frame that hope until next week when Pentecost comes, but today, there is that empty feeling that one cannot avoid, that some things in life come to an end and this is one of them. Luke wants us to know that Jesus has left his disciples and gone away. They are now on their own.

I was talking with a young man recently who was telling me about the empty feeling that he has after a date when he realizes that this is not the one. And everybody here who has ever dated another person knows exactly what I am talking about. You come to that point in the relationship whether you have been together several years, or several months, or only several hours, and you realize it's over. This is not the right one. And maybe you kiss goodbye, or he leaves the room, or you say farewell as one of you gets out of the taxi, and you get this haunting feeling that you are alone again.

Someone has said to me that you can never get enough of whatever it is that does not satisfy. And endings always leave us unsatisfied, whether it's death or divorce, or the end of a relationship, or leaving a job, or parting from someone in whom you had placed some hope, there is always something that is left incomplete.

The disciples were standing there on that mountain side wanting more, needing more, waiting for more, because Jesus was finally gone from them. They feared that what they had was not enough.

In Luke's sequel, the book of Acts, Luke punctuates the awkwardness of Jesus' departure by painting a picture of the disciples standing there on the Mount of Olives, shading their eyes, squinting at the sun, trying to hold their gaze in the sky as if they were following the plume of a rising rocket disappearing into the heavens above Cape Kennedy. And just at that moment when they figure that they have seen him for the last time, two men in white robes, and we know who they are, appear to the disciples and say, "Why are you guys standing around here looking into heaven? Jesus has gone and left you behind. And he'll come again. But not now. So what are you doing standing around here? Let's get to work."¹

And you know, it was enough. Enough to gain a vision again of what it was that should come next. The Spirit had not yet arrived, but the emptiness of Jesus departure was precisely the void that was needed so that out of that emptiness that they felt they could begin to see with the eyes of their heart what was the hope to which they were called, what were the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what was the immeasurable greatness of the power of God for those who wait and trust in him.

In time they got to work. They honed and crafted the good news of Jesus Christ, which they had seen and experienced, and they took it into all the world. They healed the sick and performed the mighty deeds that Jesus himself had wrought.

It was not always glorious, there were dark periods in the history of Christendom after that time. Constantine mixed religion and politics and it was not a good alchemy. There have been dark periods, and evil performed in the name of God. But when the

church has been faithful to the grace and love of God made known in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus it has been at its best.

It has been the blending of heart and mind, soul and spirit that makes of faith not irrational fanaticism, but the faithful witness of those whose desire is to reach out to the world to touch the face of humanity with the love of God. And it has changed life for the better, shined hope where there has been despair, brought life where death had reigned. And it began when Jesus left them, when the eyes of the hearts of the disciples began to discern out of their emptiness what it was that God would have them do next.

We tend to want to move as quickly as possible through such fallow periods in our lives, those times when we feel lonely, or sad, or abandoned, or empty. But we would be wise to be patient and stand ready in such times, because it is out of the void that God often does his most creative work.

Robert Raines shares a prayer in his book *Going Home*, a prayer that was written on the occasion of his leaving his family after his divorce. He and his wife had shared four children and a life of more than twenty years together, so parting was not easy, it felt like a terrible failure, and Raines felt empty. But somehow he summoned the words to write a prayer for his loved ones, a prayer expressing his trust that God would meet him and his family in the things yet to come, even as God had journeyed with him in all that had transpired before. So Bob Raines prayed,

As we separate and the ties unbind and the threads of our lives disentangle and we make ready for a new weaving, let us believe in our hearts that nothing that we have shared together that is good will be lost, that all we were takes its honored place in our life's journey, that nothing is cancelled, but some things are concluded, that much we cannot say or communicate, nonetheless abides and endures, that nothing can separate us from your love, in your love.²

On Ascension Sunday we are left with the picture of the disciples standing on the Mount of Olives, feeling a bit empty and not quite sure what it is that should come next. They do not see Jesus any longer, but they also know that there is the promise that though the threads of their lives have disentangled, they are nonetheless making ready for a new weaving, even if they do not yet know the nature of its warp. It is, I think, an apt description of where many of us are from time to time in life. The past behind us, the future uncertain, and there we are facing forward unsure how to move on.

A few years ago I was asked to teach a class on preaching. The students were seminarians in their second and third years, and most were inexperienced and unformed as preachers. The class involved both theory and practice. Week after week I heard these young preachers preach some of the most terrible sermons I have ever heard in my life. Not so much because the students didn't know how to preach, but because the students did not know how to listen, how to listen to their own lives, how to search their own hearts, how to be patient with all within their own faith that was unsettled. It is, after all, out of the issues of our heart engaging the scriptures that any good preaching comes, and Christian discipleship for that matter.

One day, one of the more able and gifted students was talking about the tyranny of the blank page that faced him when he sat down to write a sermon. “I keep looking at that blank page,” he said, “and every time I start to write, I stop, because I do not know how to begin, the blankness says so much more than I do.”

“Yes,” I said, “Precisely.” It is the emptiness of the page and the openness of the heart that is the means by which God will write the sermon that you await.

What those disciples standing on the Mount of Olives gaping into heaven remind us is that we must be patient with the emptiness and the unformed substance of our life, for it is there in what is not now settled that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened, so that we may know what is the hope to which we are called, and the immeasurable greatness of the God who is at work within us.

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¹ Paraphrase of Acts 1:11.

² Robert Raines, *Going Home*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. 46.