

“Still Standing There?”
A Sermon for Ascension Sunday
Text: Acts 1: 1 – 11
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If the life of Jesus, and the scripture we just read, were all a three-act play, we’d be at the end of the third act, just before the curtain went down. The play opened with a high-tension pregnancy announcement and an unusual birth, followed by a high-speed run to a foreign nation as a temporary refugee. And the play continued through visits to a temple; travels across hills and mountains; more than one boat trip; a betrayal; a violent death; and a discovery that love conquers even the worst that we can imagine, in a resurrection that broadcasts hope across the ages.

And so the final curtain comes down, and the disciples – and we – are transfixed and our mouths are hanging open, and we haven’t moved. And then the theater ushers come by and ask us: why are you still standing there?

Hold that thought while I do some reminiscing.

Back in the day a half century ago, when my first child was born, daddies were not allowed into the hospital delivery room. Period. No exceptions. Now, during my days in seminary, along with the rest of my peers I had spent a semester in hands-on training, learning counseling as a student chaplain in a hospital. And the ward I was assigned to was Boston City Hospital’s 72 bed maternity ward. What do you mean I can’t be in the delivery room? No. Those were the rules.

And there was another rule for daddies. At least during the baby’s first day we weren’t allowed to hold our babies. Instead, a nurse stood behind glass, holding my baby up so I could see him. My naked first born, a boy. And I looked at him. And of course, I counted: ten fingers, ten toes. Wow. The miracle of a new life. But after a while the nurse kind of moved around restlessly. Okay daddy, you’ve seen the baby. Now, you need to get your act together and move along, and do whatever you need to do, because now, you are a parent.

Pregnancy is a drama for mom-to-be and dad-to-be, and all the surrounding family and friends. But when that drama is over and the baby is born, and you’ve counted all the fingers and toes: don’t you have something to do? Why are you still standing there?

Enough about me. What about the disciples and the scripture of the morning?

The disciples lived in what they thought was a layer cake universe. The waters above the firmament and the waters below the firmament, and in between a third layer that was everything else: the earth and the seas and the sky and even the heavens. So when Jesus was taken from them after promising the Holy Spirit, they saw what they expected to see – Jesus being lifted up, into the heavens.

As for us: we know that “up” is a relative term. We live in a cosmos of galaxies and black holes and indescribable distances where there is no measurable gravity and so there is no up or down. We live in a universe that demands a God greater than all those light years and more than any quantum physics can measure – which makes the idea of a God who is more, caring for the least of us who are less, absolutely overwhelming to the point that we are awe-struck.

When we attempt to see the scriptural account in the light of a God so great, it's little wonder that we are stuck, just standing there with our mouths hanging open. Which makes the message of every messenger of God (every angel) all the more important. Why are you just standing there? You have a message to proclaim and a presence to share. Don't just stand there. Do something, for God's sake!

Not long after Christianity started to spread across the then-known world, a few pious believers decided that they would imitate Jesus' forty days in the wilderness – go off to some deserted place and pray and meditate and be still. Except some of them never came back. They stayed out in the wilderness and kept on meditating and praying and seeking blessed visions. Other devout Christians would bring them food and encourage those hermits, some of whom attracted other hermits to live out there too, and together they became monastic communities that just kept to themselves and spent their entire lives praying and meditating.

Now far be it from me to criticize somebody else's piety, but I want to reach back through the centuries and shake them and say: "Read your scriptures!" There is a time to be enthralled by the beauty that God has given us, wherever we live. There is a time to meditate on God's goodness and mercy. There is a time to give thanks for blessings large and small. But at some point, the angels' question has to be asked: "what are you doing, still standing there?" All that you have received was not for you to hoard for yourself. Every gift of God is given to be shared.

Back to my reminiscing.

I was in sixth grade, at Public School #22 in Yonkers, New York. There were about thirty kids in that classroom, 15 boys and 15 girls. At some point during the year, we were led downstairs to the gymnasium and informed that instead of our customary physical education activities, we were going to spend the next four weeks learning how to square dance. We were to line up in two lines by gender, and the person we were next to, in the other line, would be our partner for the four-week period. And it turned out that my partner for the dance was Judy Wiggins. I do not remember the name of any other student who was in my class that year, and for the life of me I cannot recall the name of the teacher. And I don't care. But I remember Judy. Judy was to become my template for the ideal girlfriend, in appearance and voice and grace. And I got to square dance with her as my partner for a month that I hoped would never end.

I meditated on those dance sessions. I had visions, at twelve years old, of Judy in a wedding gown and us growing old together. I was enthralled. I was in rapture.

And I never said a word to her that hinted at relationship. I was too shy, too withdrawn. I don't think I ever looked her in the eye. Judy never learned how I felt. And the next year we went on to different junior high schools in that city, and I never saw her again.

If my present-day self could communicate back through the years with my twelve-year old self, I would be shouting at myself: "why are you still standing there? You idiot!" Of course, it's just a childhood infatuation. Of course, it's just puppy love. But really, it isn't any of those; it isn't anything, unless you do something, say something.

Enough with the reminiscing.

All too often my present day relationship with God is too much like my long-ago relationship with Judy. True, I cannot reach out to hold the hand of Jesus; but I can hold the hand of one who is grieving and

feeling lost and alone. I cannot give a hug to the man of Nazareth, but I can reach out to the hungry and the hurting. I cannot look the Master in the eye; but I can look into the eyes of one who has been excluded and demonized, and I can share acceptance and hope.

The one thing I must not do, dare not do, cannot do if my relationship with God is real, is to just keep standing there. Yes I can pray in worship. Yes I can look at the beauty of God's creation and give thanks. Yes to all of that. But sooner or later some angel of God is going to ask me: "why are you still standing there? Worship is not complete until it issues into action. So, why are you still standing there?"