

*Shattered and Uplifted*  
Seventh Sunday of Easter  
Ascension Day  
May 13, 2018  
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Texts: Acts 1.1-11;  
Psalm 47;  
Ephesians 1.15-23;  
Luke 24.44-53

Have you ever found yourself living a scenario over and over again – same story, different day -- wondering why nothing new ever seems to break lose? It happens in so many different places like a relationship that circles back to the same argument over and over again. I'm beginning to feel like the release of the General Synod notebook has become such a moment. The same vitriol in the form of a new overture rehashing the same arguments we've been having for years in the RCA. And I felt some of the same sitting in the community conversation held this past Monday night. I've felt this anger and this pain voiced by so many of us in this community before and I've heard the same reactions that rise in the face of it. Same conversation, different day. When will something new break lose? I'm ready for something new!

In the midst of this Ground-hog day<sup>1</sup> kind of week we are invited to contemplate the Ascension of the Lord. I read in the Christian Century a couple of weeks ago that the Amish experience the day of ascension as a day of sorrow and mourning.<sup>2</sup> They probably don't sing the Hallelujah Chorus because for them the day of ascension marks the moment when Jesus left us. This was a week of all weeks when I would have liked to sit face to face with Jesus to ask him "Lord, what do we need to do? How does this become a different story with a new ending?" I was ready to bring on the day of mourning. I was ready to join with the Amish who see this day

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to a movie from many years ago called "Groundhogs Day" where the main character keeps waking up to the same day over and over again.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac S. Villegas, "Living by the Word, May 10, Ascension of the Lord", *The Christian Century*, April 25, 2018.

as a day of loss; ready to join those first disciples looking up toward heaven wondering how in the world can we do this without you?

Then I got an email from Rachelle Oppenhuizen with a quote from a book that was gifted to me by Barbara Timmer – a book by Christian Wiman called *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*. From that email that pointed to this book that pushed me back into our texts with new eyes, I am once again ready to hear the Hallelujah Chorus at the conclusion of this day.

When Jesus gathers for the last time with the disciples in the gospel of Luke, it tells us he opened their minds to the scriptures. How everything that was written about him had to be fulfilled. How does he summarize all of this – everything written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms? That the Messiah is to suffer and then to rise. His entry into human life came with a willingness to suffer; to join with us in this in the mess that is the world and that suffering took him into death by way of betrayal and abandonment, and violence. Look around: same suffering – different day.

But Jesus kept insisting that there is a new ending. Loneliness can be met by community. Injustice can be exposed and then turned around. Betrayal can be confronted and healed as Jesus does with Peter in John chapter 21. The one who did the betrayal can make amends and the one who was betrayed can offer forgiveness. Again and again and again Jesus shows us the new ending; that after suffering comes rising.

The baton that he hands to us on this day is to bear witness to this movement: to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. I don't know if that rings bells for you as being the same movement. Whether repentance seems like suffering and forgiveness like rising. But it struck me as precisely the same move. If you have ever found yourself confronted about your role in someone else's suffering and you realize that you need to change, you learn quickly that the work of turning – of repentance – is hard. Especially when you recognize yourself as part of the same-story-different-day dynamic!

I sat with someone recently who realized she had been running away from conflict for 20 years. Anytime it got hard she bolted. She had broken relationships littered all over town. There was all kind of injustice that led up to those conflicts. It wasn't all her fault – not by any stretch. She realized that if she wanted this story to have a new ending she had to change. That work of turning away from the impulse to run was another form of suffering. No wonder her impulse – like so many of us – was to gloss it over and reach for what is familiar and hope it will go away. She was coming to recognize that she if she wanted a new ending she needed to change. Her testimony was that the hard work of repentance was like coming through one kind of suffering and diving into another. At the time we talked, she felt completely empty like ash on a burned-out heap. Those were her words. But she was also sensing for the first time that on the other side of that suffering was a rising – a kind of forgiveness and restoration that she never really thought possible before.

So let me share with you the quote from *My Bright Abyss*.

“Our minds are constantly trying to bring God down to our level rather than letting (God) lift us up into levels of which we were not previously capable. This is as true in life as it is in art. Thus we love within the lines that experience has drawn for us, we create out of impulses that are familiar, and if were honest with ourselves, exhausted. What might it mean to be drawn into meanings that, in some profound and necessary sense, shatter us? This is what it means to love.”<sup>3</sup>

After I read that pieces several times, I could not help but see this scene with the disciples through that lens – this time in the version from Acts. Jesus has been with them for 40 days since his resurrection connecting the dots from his ministry and his teaching to the realm of God he was handing over to them.

Here is what the disciples want to know as their last question to him: “Is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Really? That’s their question? They still have their minds on the plans they had before he came.

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 49-50.

“Our minds are constantly trying to bring God down to our level...” They still desire to rise up as a nation and make Israel great again. “We create out of impulses that are familiar, and if we are honest with ourselves, impulses that are exhausted.”

And then with a kindness that blows my mind, Jesus simply offers to them in the coming gift of the Spirit a new way to love and new ending to the same tired stories we get stuck inside of.

But, of course the rub is that there may be some parts of us or some part of our desire or our vision that needs first to be shattered so that we can find a new way to live into love.

I don't know if we are on the brink of a shattering as the RCA....maybe – maybe not. It feels like we are in the middle of something shattering as a country right now. And maybe there is more to come. Maybe you are in the middle of something like that right now.

It's not because of the shattering that I feel ready to hear the Hallelujah Chorus. It's because of the promise of rising. It's because of this image.<sup>4</sup> Yes, God entered into the suffering but it was for the purpose of lifting us up.

I now know what to pray as we face various examples of same-story-different-day: “God, lift us up as Jesus was lifted up. Lift us up to see what we could not see before and to be what we could not be before. And whatever it takes to get us there, we trust you....even if it means to be shattered before we can be uplifted.”

The place I want to put my eyes and my heart today....is on the lifting up.

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<sup>4</sup> The image I mean here is an art installation we have in our chancel on Ascension Sunday. You can view the image here: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10206206989358440&set=pb.1375776276.-2207520000.1526207651.&type=3&theater>