

Half Way There
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They made it ½ way up the mountain.

To Bethany.

At the bottom of the mountain was the Garden of Gethsemane, the place where they had seen Jesus arrested, the place where they had all run away. At the top was the summit of the Mt. of Olives, the place where Jesus wept over Jerusalem, the place from where Jesus began his final descent into the city.

This disciples had followed Jesus up this mountain many times, but this time, they only made it ½ way. This time, they never made it to the top.

This week, we commemorate the Ascension of the Lord as we remember and re-tell the story of Jesus ascending back into the heavens. And this year, we get to hear Luke's version – both at the end of the gospel of Luke and the beginning of Acts. Luke and Acts share the same author who intended for it to be a 2 volume work. Acts is meant to be read as the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Luke ends with Jesus explaining to the disciples why the Messiah must suffer and then calling on them to be witnesses to all that they've seen and heard before he is taken up into heaven. Acts begins with the disciples staring up into heaven as Jesus is taken from them when they see two messengers who basically say to them, "Quit looking up. It's time to go back down."

Mountains in Scripture often serve the role as a place of revelation or as a place of retreat. Moses received the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai. Elijah ran to Mt. Horeb to hide in a cave where God spoke to him. Jesus often would go up on a mountain by himself to pray. Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus' transfiguration on Mt. Tabor. But regardless of the reason for the pilgrimage to the top, the people always have to come down and deal with life not as they wish it to be but as it really is. Moses had to come down to find the people worshipping the Golden Calf. Elijah realized he couldn't run away from Ahab and that his desire to die and thus escape that which he was afraid to confront was not a desire that God would honor. And often, as soon as Jesus descended the mountain, he became painfully aware that his disciples consistently didn't get it, that they lacked faith.

I'm struck by how often in our faith story, we see that the people of God only get glimpses of the world being as they want it to be, of the full indwelling of God, but almost never more than the glimpse. They always have to come down the mountain.

But in this case, they don't even make it to the top.

This image of not making it to the top is really sticking with me right now. What a heavy few weeks it has been. Last week there were two mass shootings. People who are doing exactly

what we're doing – attending a house of worship – had their praise interrupted by gunfire and five people were killed. Then, a white supremacist travelled several hours to find the community with the highest percentage of black people with no other motivation than to kill them. And then this week, we heard about the second most deadly school shooting in our nation's history.

I am so angry and sad and I'm guessing many of you feel the same way. I am angry because this keeps happening and it seems like we as a nation never make any substantive change to stop it from happening or at least make it less likely to happen. And we know those who say that it's inevitable are not telling the truth because this doesn't happen in other wealthy nations – it just doesn't. It happens here over and over again because we as a society refuse to do anything about it. Specifically, we refuse to address the fact that an 18 year old can legally purchase two assault rifles, more than 300 rounds of ammunition, and body armor for his birthday. We have more guns than people in this country...we have a ratio of 1.2 guns for every person. That's more than double the ratio of the nation with the second highest gun to person rate – Yemen. In the U.S. guns are the cause of 80% of all homicides. In the UK, guns are the cause of 4%. In Australia, 13%. In Canada, 37%. In the U.S. – 80%.

I am angry. This happens over and over again when it doesn't have to. And make no mistake, it happens so frequently because we as a nation have made guns a sacred idol – a god that our nation bows down to and worships and is more than willing to sacrifice kids on its altar.

I am also sad. I am sad because it feels like there's little hope that things will change. We know how this will play out. This school shooting will dominate our news for a few days or maybe even a few weeks. Politicians will offer "thoughts and prayers" and say something must be done. People with mental illness will be scapegoated – which by the way those with mental illness are far more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of it. There will be talk about arming teachers. And then the conversation will fade and we won't think about it until the next devastating shooting happens.

I am angry because we could solve this and I am sad because I don't have much hope that we will – at least not right now.

But I finally landed at a place of hope this week. It's only a glimmer. It is certainly not hope that our national political leaders will suddenly do something about gun violence. It's not a hope that the gun lobby will suddenly worship God instead of guns. Rather, it's a hope that comes out of our biblical story today – the story where the disciples only made it ½ way up the mountain.

I wonder if the reason why the disciples could only make it ½ way up the mountain during their last journey with Jesus is because they needed to learn that they had been called to do something that was going to be profoundly hard and it wasn't always going to work out the way they would hope. There would be a lot of times when they would not experience the mountaintop.

Soon, they would have to go back to Jerusalem, back to the place where they had run away when Jesus needed them most. They would have to find the strength and the courage to carry on that which Jesus started without him and a whole lot of that time, things were not going to work out the way I imagine they envisioned it.

They even say to Jesus, “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” No, the answer to that question was, “No.” They had imagined a future that was very different than the future they would actually live into. The kingdom was not going to be restored. And one way or another, they were going to have to live into their calling anyway.

It’s interesting to me that in the story that seems like such a triumphal story—Jesus ascending to heaven—what we see the disciples doing is not ascending but rather having to descend to live into a future that they did not envision for themselves. And I wonder if that, in one way or another, is the story for all of us. We only ever make it ½ way up the mountain before something unexpected or bad or disappointing or even devastatingly tragic happens.

And it’s in that place, that in-between place that we find out what we must do. The angel tells the disciples, “Stop staring up into heaven.” Things may not have worked out like the disciples expected, but there was still a world filled with people who needed to know that God loved them. The angel is blunt – don’t look up. Learn from Jesus. Jesus, the one we believe to be the Incarnate Son of God, did not stay in heaven, did not stay in power but, instead, emptied himself and came down to share in our humanity, to share in our mess. And the angel tells the disciples – and I think tells us – to do the exact same thing. “Quit looking up. Instead, get down in the mess. Love people, do justice, serve others. Even, and maybe especially, when it’s hard. Even, and maybe especially, when you don’t think it will make much difference.”

After the last few weeks, it’s hard to be able to see that hope is actually all around us and yet it is if we look for it. The truth is that the world can be unspeakably hard and incredibly beautiful – all at the same time. After a couple of weeks where the unspeakably hard has felt overwhelming, let me tell you about one really good thing that’s happened recently. At the beginning of this month, we along with our neighbors at First Parish, started the Rainbow Youth Alliance, using our youth room as a gathering space for kids who are a part of the LGBTQ community as well as teen allies while a parenting support group was taking place next door.

When I lived in Birmingham, I preached a funeral for Jay, a thirteen year old kid who died by suicide. Jay was a trans boy. His parents were supportive and affirming. But he did not find school to be a safe place. And he didn’t have another community where he could find that. And sadly, Jay is not alone. According to the Trevor Project, 45% of LGBTQ youth have contemplated suicide, 4 times more likely than non-queer youth. And trans people are the demographic in our country most likely to be victims of violence. But do you know what makes those numbers decrease drastically? – when LGBTQ youth have safe and affirming spaces and people who accept them for who they are. First, at home, then at school, and then in the larger community.

I don't want to overstate what we're doing. There are groups throughout the Greater Boston area that are doing far more than we have the capacity to do to serve LGBTQ youth, but we are doing one small thing that can help quite a bit.

And guess what, there are so many more things that we might be able to do. It is great to have our friends from East Congregational worshipping with us today. Our two churches right now are in the process of listening to our community through community interviews, demographic research, and prayer walks to see how we might take the angel's words to heart – stop looking up and instead get busy serving right now.

In a time like this, is so tempting to give into despair, to give into anger, to simply throw our hands up and say, "There's nothing we can do."

But there is...there is always something we can do. We may not be able to change gun policy in our country – though we should certainly try and try and try for the rest of our lives if we have to. But even if we never succeed at that, there's so many ways we can offer hope, we can offer love to hurting people throughout our community and beyond.

Whenever we start to think that in a world of so much evil, there's so little we can do, God says to us, "Stop looking up. Stop waiting for things to be different before you act. And instead, look around. There's a world of people out there who you can love right now. There's a world of people out there who you can serve right now."

This story ends with the angel's last words, that one day Jesus too will descend, that one day all will be made right. But that day is not today. And that day does not depend on you or me being perfect but it does call us to keep trying. So while we wait for that day, let's make sure we do all we can to love and serve those around us and to trust that whether things work out the way we want them to or not, it will be work well worth doing.

The disciples only made it ½ way up the mountain when the angel told them to go back down because there's a lot of work to do. So let's get busy.

Benediction:

"May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.”