

“Where’s the Boss?”

A Sermon on Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11

May 17, 2015

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Imagine for a moment that you are climbing the Mount of Olives. As you near the top, you turn around and look across the valley from which you’ve just climbed. On the other side of the valley is another hill, and there at the top of it is Jerusalem. From here you can see the most prominent feature of this holy city, the Temple. Just 43 days ago, something mysterious happened there: the curtain dividing the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. As you look beyond the Temple, past Pilate’s Antonia Fortress, you see the gate that leads out of the city to a barren area known as Golgotha. Here on this desolate and rocky mound, Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. That was 43 days ago, too. His cross is gone, the memory remains. You turn back and gaze up the short distance you have yet to climb to reach the top of the Mount of Olives. You continue your journey, and find yourself standing on dusty, rock-strewn ground. The sky is bright blue, and the welcome shade of passing clouds provides a break from the intense sun above. A warm breeze blows across the crest of the hill, and the stiff gnarled branches of nearby olive trees sway ever so slightly. A group of twelve men is gathered nearby. Eleven of them are listening intently as the twelfth man speaks passionately and urgently. This, you realize, is Jesus and his apostles. He died, yet he lives.

You can only begin to imagine the joy these apostles must be feeling. Here in the flesh is the man who had summoned each of them away from their vocation, calling them away from their fishing nets and tax booths. He gave them a new vocation. He became their new boss, their leader, their teacher, and their friend. Then, after three short years, he was taken from them, executed and buried. What loss! Yet here he stands with them now. They must be overjoyed to have him back with them.

As you move closer to the group, feeling the joy welling up inside yourself, something amazing happens. Jesus is lifted up, hidden by a cloud, and then he is gone. You and the eleven men Jesus had been speaking with stare dumbfounded into the sky. Now where did he go? And more importantly, what next?

I do not believe words are sufficient enough to describe what the apostles must have been experiencing at that moment. As I was reflecting on this story, I was reminded of something that happened early in my freshman year of high school. I was a member of my high school chorus. Mr. Umla, our conductor, had been working with us for several weeks, helping us prepare for our Christmas concert. On the night of the big concert, all of the chorus members were there, but Mr. Umla was not. He had suffered a heart attack and was in the hospital. Here we were, a rookie choir who barely had enough training to carry a tune in a wheelbarrow, and suddenly we were without a conductor. We panicked, as teenagers are apt to do. Most of us didn't think we would perform. How could we? We didn't have our conductor.

One of the members of the chorus, a senior, stepped forward, regrouped us, and calmed us down. She reminded us that Mr. Umla had taught us everything we needed to know. He had worked hard to prepare us for this very moment. It would be tough not having him there, yet going on in spite of his absence would show everyone in the audience what an amazing teacher he was. She stepped up to that stand and conducted a very memorable choral Christmas concert. I can easily remember the anxiety and fear my classmates and I felt at the news of Mr. Umla's absence. It must have been a mere shadow of the anxiety and fear that the apostles must have experienced. In the span of just over a month, their leader, teacher, and friend had been taken from them *twice*. Their boss is gone. Again.

There is no doubt in my mind that these apostles are equipped to do the work Jesus is calling them to do. They may not have realized it. They may not have had confidence in themselves to follow through. Jesus realizes it, and Jesus is confident in them. He would not have gone otherwise.

Sometimes we might feel like Jesus is absent from us. There are times and seasons in our lives where God seems as far away from us as Neptune. Things seem to be going fine in our lives, all beautiful sunny skies and warm breezes, and then *bam*, the world comes crashing down around us and there goes Jesus, skittering up into the clouds. We look up and we're tempted to ask, "Where'd you go? What next?" All of us have experienced a time like that in our lives. In hospital rooms. In the unemployment line. In the lawyer's office. Maybe you are experiencing such a season in your life right now, and maybe you're asking, "Jesus, where did you go?"

These scriptures might not seem to offer very much hope and assurance at first glance. Jesus' primary command to the apostles upon his departure is to wait. Hang tight. How much hope and assurance does that command conjure up? Not much for me. I hate waiting. I am not good at it. I'd rather just get at it and get it over with. I do not think I've ever heard from anyone who doesn't think they need to be more patient in their lives. I know lots of people who won't ask for patience, yet they all agree they need more of it. Waiting is hard. Jesus knows that waiting can also be fruitful.

Becky and I visited the Grand Canyon several years ago, and along the way, we stopped at a burned out forest. At first, I thought this was a tragedy. Our guide corrected me, though, and told us that these fires were necessary for the health of the forest. The heat from the fire that burned the brush on the forest floor opened the cones in the trees above enabling the seeds to fall to the rich soil below where they could take root and grow new trees. That new growth takes

time, though, and the scorch marks on the lower parts of the tree never really go away. The forest much remain patient in order to realize the new growth.

The apostles needed to be patient to wait for the Holy Spirit. In that respect, we are better off than our friends the apostles here. The Holy Spirit is here with us, now. No waiting.

Jesus offers his apostles one more thing before he leaves them. He offers them a blessing. As he walks with them, and talks with them, he lifts his hands to them and blesses them. While he was blessing them, Luke tells us, he was carried into heaven. He was gone. His blessing remained. Jesus' blessing is so powerful. When the apostles receive Jesus' blessing they receive the power and strength to go on even though Jesus is not there. It gave them the strength to worship Jesus and return to Jerusalem (where the waiting would occur) *with great joy*. Jesus' blessing was so powerful that it was contagious, and all the while the apostles were waiting, they were blessing God in the Temple. They were blessed to be a blessing.

How has Jesus blessed you? Think about your life and begin to recount the ways, big and small, that Jesus has blessed you. Perhaps you are blessed by his presence in worship here, or in the presence of this family of faith. Perhaps he blessed you in a small interaction with a stranger. Perhaps he's blessed you in big ways that have changed your life. Mr. Umla blessed me with his teaching, and I was able to be a blessing to those who gathered for that concert that night, and I hope to Mr. Umla himself. I encourage you to slow down and remember the ways that Jesus has blessed you and continues to bless you. How can you use that blessing to bless God and others?

At the end of all this, we may wonder why Jesus even had to leave in the first place. I think the boss left because the workers were ready to carry on. Karl Barth, in a reflection on the Ascension of Jesus, writes:

[Jesus] is the man in whom God has not only expressed his love, not only painted it on the wall, but put it to work. He is the principal actor who has taken upon

himself and has overcome human affliction, the injustice done by ourselves and by everybody else, our guilt and anxiety, our fate, even our death... He is the Son of God, who was made man... who became our brother, in order that we may be with him children of the Father, that we may all be reunited with God and may share in his blessings.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus has made us ready. Ready to wait. Ready to bless. Ready to work. As we gaze up to heaven with the apostles looking for Jesus, we can rest assured that he is not gone. He is with each of us, no matter what.

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, Karl. Prayer and Preaching. SCM Press, 1964. p. 65.