

Welcome Home

While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. Luke 24:51

During my high school and college years, my family had a tiny dog, a cocker spaniel, named Katie. She was the runt of her litter. While she wasn't the smartest dog in the world, she was very sweet and caring. After I went off to college and was gone for several months, I remember my family wondering how she would react to seeing me again after such a long time. We just weren't sure how much she'd remember after this extended length of time.

Well, when I returned home and walked through the door, Katie most certainly remembered me. In her excitement, her whole backside, not just her little nub of a tail, was wagging. As I came closer to her, she stood up on her hind legs and wrapped her front paws around my leg as if to give me a hug, like she was also human. It was a really, sweet and special welcome home moment.

However, the welcome home moment she shared with me was nothing compared to the greeting she gave my bag of laundry that I brought in next. I thought she wagged a lot seeing me. Man, when I laid that bag down on the floor she attacked that thing with such joy. She was sniffing like there was no tomorrow and then her sniffing would turn into snorting and sneezing. Boy, she was in doggie heaven. I was a little afraid her backside was going to detach from her frontside, she was so excited. I guess you take what you can get, right? Coming in second place to a bad of dirty laundry, I guess there's worse things, right?

Memorable welcome home moments happen in all sorts of ways, don't they? On this Mother's Day weekend, it's fitting to give a shout out to those welcome home moments that involve moms. Moments like her caring embrace or that special treat she makes for your homecoming, like chocolate chip cookies, to name a couple. There're also those special welcome home moments from children as they come rushing to the door so excited to greet their parents. Many of us have seen the videos of families reunited with loved ones in airports and other places, as powerful emotions pour out after an extended separation. Along with numerous other examples that could be shared, safe to say, we're familiar with welcome home moments.

With this in mind, it may not come as a surprise to you when I tell you that this weekend we witness other welcome home moments here at church. From this weekend on, we'll see many families reconnected with their children home from college. Over the next few months we'll learn that several families have welcomed that long-anticipated baby into their homes. And along with these moments in our church family, this weekend we are reminded of Jesus' heavenly homecoming.

Our readings focus on Jesus' ascension that moment forty days after Easter when Jesus departs His disciples, returns to heaven and His visible presence is removed from earth. The readings you have heard in this service only briefly describe this welcome home moment. In Acts, we hear that Jesus is covered by a cloud and disappears bringing to mind echoes of the Lord's Old Testament presence with Israel via a cloud. In Luke, we are told that Jesus is carried into heaven reminiscent of Elijah's whirlwind chariot ride into heaven. And then in Ephesians, we hear the description of Jesus sitting in the place of authority in heaven and what His power and presence means for the Church going forward.

These readings share an earthly view of Jesus' heavenly return and they may not seem all that memorable. Yet, these readings do affirm and connect with another place in the Bible where Jesus' ascension and His heavenly homecoming appear to be described as well. In the book of Revelation, the apostle John, shares his vision of heaven using picture language to attempt to capture this other worldly experience. And in one scene of this vision, John describes the Lamb who was slain, a.k.a. Jesus, returning to the heavenly throne. John's words, while challenging to process, complement the earthly perspective we hear in these readings this weekend, with a view of Jesus' ascension from heaven's throne room. Listen to what John describes in Revelation chapter 5:

"... And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals. And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had

taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.’”

Now, that sounds like a much more memorable welcome home moment! And if we were to read the rest of the chapter, we would hear this song of the creatures and elders echoed by numerous angels and then all of the creatures of heaven and earth joining together in this very song of praise and worship. Getting a glimpse of heaven’s perspective of Jesus’ ascension is truly stunning. So much so, that it seems rather shameful and disheartening that Jesus’ ascension becomes such an afterthought so often in the life of the Church and the believer.

Our need to observe this magnificent moment on a more convenient day betrays our greater struggle to fit God into the idol of our schedules. We speak those creedal lines about the ascension having forgotten what this scriptural fact actually means for us. We fall prey to the idea that the lack of Jesus’ visible presence here on earth means that He has done His part and now it’s time for us to do our part turning our relationship with Him into primarily following His example. We begin to doubt that Jesus’ power and presence remain as effective and beneficial as that phrase ‘out of sight, out of mind,’ becomes more and more our reality. Lord have mercy on our sinful struggles to fully treasure and appreciate Jesus’ ascension.

In His mercy, even as we struggle to fit Jesus’ ascension, His heavenly homecoming, into our own schedules, Jesus’ ascension assures us that the Lord has now fit us into heaven. While we easily forget what we mean as we confess the ascension in the creeds, this moment reminds us that Jesus truly hasn’t forgotten us. Although we can’t visibly see Jesus, our relationship with Him hasn’t changed as His forgiving Word continues to connect us to Him. Into our doubts and worries about His power and presence, Jesus delivers the fullness of His presence and power in His tangible Sacraments of Baptism and Communion so that our hearts might know His presence in a very physical way. By these means, our Lord mercifully shows us that this easily overlooked ascension moment for Jesus is the sure and certain foundation of our own heavenly homecoming. It’s not an afterthought!

In the hymnals in your pews, the songs are organized by the Church Year. On the top-outside corners of the hymns, the Church Year section is labeled. For Jesus’ ascension, this hymnal has five dedicated hymns, hymns 491-495. If you took the time to read through these hymns, some of the words would highlight for you that Jesus’ welcome home moment is also our welcome home moment. I want to highlight the last two verses from hymn 494, *See, the Lord Ascends in Triumph*, and you’re invited to open up to this hymn and to follow along.

“Now our heav’nly Aaron enters / With His blood with in the veil; / Joshua now is come to Canaan, / And the kings before Him quail. / Now He plants the tribes of Israel / In their promised resting place; / Now our great Elijah offers / Double portion of His grace.

He has raised our human nature / On the clouds to God’s right hand; / There we sit in heav’nly places, / There with Him in glory stand. / Jesus reigns, adored by angels; / Man with God is on the throne. / By our mighty Lord’s ascension / We by faith behold our own.”

With rhyme and scriptural imagery, these two verses emphasize Jesus’ welcome home moment as our own. Those saints of old, Aaron, Joshua and Elijah, find the fulfillment of their lives’ work in Jesus’ ascension. The work of Aaron, Joshua and Elijah years ago foreshadowed this welcome home moment as Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and ascension mean the return of all believers in Christ into that heavenly promised land.

After the fall into sin in the garden of Eden, humanity and God could not dwell together in perfect harmony. But now with Jesus’ bodily ascension into heaven, that unity and community is restored. We witness this reality now as we reflect on Jesus’ ascension and we are spurred on in hope that this reality will become fully ours when He returns. Dear forgiven and loved saints in Christ, Jesus’ ascension means you’re heavenly homecoming is assured and that your best welcome home moment is still to come! Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan