

There is a uniquely deep grief and bittersweet feeling when someone you love, who you know is going to die soon, actually does pass on to join God in God's heavenly kingdom. Especially when this dearly beloved one has been in pain for a long time, perhaps they've gone through lots of rounds of treatment and have just said they'd rather go than deal with the pain and struggle of all of that again. Or maybe they've had the blessing of reaching a dear old age and with their loved ones around them have decided they're ready to go. It is never easy when someone we love passes on. It's one of the very hardest realities of life, even when we know it's coming and we know their pain will be over. God is surely with us in that grieving.

I cannot help but think of this type of grief when I think of Jesus' disciples, hearing these words of Jesus and seeing him carried up into heaven. My heart just hurts and reaches for them, knowing that Jesus was going to pass on into the heavenly kingdom, and yet there is still a change of life, a grieving that comes in waves, a physical loss of the one whom they dropped everything to follow.

Perhaps it's a comfort to read that even after Jesus' ascension, the disciples were able to return to Jerusalem, the city where they did so much ministry together, and were filled with joy upon worshipping and blessing the one whom they loved, their Messiah, Jesus, God with us. This ability to worship and bless God with great joy perhaps speaks to both the divine nature of Jesus, as well as hope for life during and after grieving. Jesus gave them not only the relationships of one another to support them in life and ministry going forward, but other tools to proclaim the holy and life-saving love of God throughout the land. Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures, promised to send upon them what his Father promised (the Holy Spirit), and they worshipped, in the temple as Jesus taught them and as they knew how to encounter God. These tools of faith, of ministry, of joining together in the body of Christ church community, certainly serve us too - learning more about God and how God works in our world through the scriptures, leaning on the power of the Holy Spirit in prayer, and worshipping together for the sake of encountering God in that holy, dedicated time each week.

The stories we heard for ascension today lay the foundation for the necessity of the Holy Spirit, whose presence and holy power we remember and celebrate on Pentecost, next week. The story of Jesus flows in a way that supports our life of faith, over the course of a year and truly a lifetime, and all the pieces weave together to create something whole and holy for the peace of our souls.

This particular story of Jesus ascending into heaven, and leaving his disciples joyfully blessing and worshipping God, is the very last story in the Gospel of Luke, the very last image we have in this very detailed account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The first story we hear in this particular gospel is also one that starts with grief. That first story is of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, Mary's relative, who was unable to have a child for most of her life. Infertility is such a complicated and heartbreaking kind of grief, impacting all areas of a family's life and such a hard tension of hope and loss. For all who are currently struggling with fertility, who have in the past, or know a beloved person who is, we pray, and know that God is with you in your grief, as God has been with women throughout the course of time. You are not alone, you are not broken, your grieving is valid, dearly beloveds.

Within Elizabeth and Zechariah's grief, God still showed up for them in the words of an angel, promising joy and gladness, a tension that seriously surprised Zechariah, as he did not think his child John would ever be possible. But John did come, bringing the promises of God's faithfulness to so many in his acts of baptism, which are the stories of ministry that begin this story arc of Luke's gospel. The promises in baptism are promises of hope, of God's assured presence throughout the baptized person's life, and yet are also deeply connected to Jesus' death too. "For if we are united in a death like his, surely we are united in a resurrection like his," the old Romans verse tells us. Joy and hope and life can still grow forth in the midst of death and grieving, as impossible as it may seem from time to time. There is so much more to the story than our grief.

The story of Jesus continues on into Pentecost, with the story and blessing of the Holy Spirit, God's breath of life and wind of creation that flows within and around each of us, every single day. The real gift to come not only from the presence of the Holy Spirit, but from the assurance that we are, all together, the body of Christ, is that we are never truly alone in our grieving. We are never alone to face the incredible hardship that comes from the joy of loving someone and sorrow of their passing. We are never alone in this body of Christ, this one common humanity which God has created out of great love, for whom Jesus died and rose again in bold and glorious resurrection hope. We are never alone in the new life we find in Christ. This is the gift of the church, of community, of the Holy Spirit who unites us in one common breath of humanity and creation. We are never alone in our hurting, hoping, holy humanity, holding each other close. Our holy, powerful, creator, loving God, present with us in the Holy Spirit, human with us in Christ Jesus, assures us that God is with us, no matter what grief or joy (or both) we may hold at any given moment.

For all of you, dear friends, who are grieving in any way, know that you are being held in prayer by your beloved community here at Mt. Zion and beyond in the great body of Christ, the communion of saints made possible by the Holy Spirit. Know that even in the depths of your grief, when your loved one has passed on, when your hope or dream for what your life might be is not able to happen, when you experience loss of any kind, there will be joy on the horizon, some day in the future, even if it seems impossible from time to time. Turn to your loving God, your Creator, who knows your pain and blesses you in the covenant of baptism, the covenant of resurrection hope and new life, for comfort, dear friends. You will always be held, always be loved, always be blessed by God, who delights in your presence. May you hold this love of God that is greater even than death closely, and be blessed. Thanks be to God, Amen.