

The Seventh Sunday of Easter
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Acts 1: 6-14

Life in the Moment

The scene in this morning's story from Acts has always tickled me. Jesus, in the story, has just ascended through the clouds, and the disciples are standing around, open-mouthed, I imagine, staring up after him. I'm not sure how long they were there staring, when two men come up and ask them what they're doing? It's an innocent enough question, but it had an edge. "Why are you standing there doing nothing?" they're asking. "Why are you gazing into heaven, wondering if Jesus is going to drop back down? Don't you have other work to be doing?" "Why are you waiting for the future, and not tending to the present, to now?" These were good questions—or at least the disciples thought so, and so they closed their mouths, went back to Jerusalem and started their work. They had plenty to do, and Jesus would come when he would come.

Whatever we make of the historical truth of Jesus' ascension—and I have trouble figuring out what it would mean for him to pass upwards through the clouds. I'm just not sure where he would go next. So whatever we make of the historical truth of Jesus' ascension, this story of the disciples, staring after him open-mouthed, doing nothing—it strikes me as true. The disciples, one of their most important qualities, as a group, is the depth of their humanness—that they share all of our weaknesses and foibles as well as our gifts. And so it strikes me that, in the wake of Jesus' absence, they would sit or stand around and think about their past with Jesus, missing him a bit, or wonder about the future—would they be with him, reconnect again. They would live in the past or the future—anything to keep them out of the present---the place they were stuck, there without their friend, Jesus. They desperately wanted to avoid the present moment, that place where reality—the reality of Jesus absence impinged on them----but they couldn't, could they....

The present moment, it's always there. Whether we spend it thinking about the past or the future, we are always in that present moment, bearing the weight of reality in whatever

way we can. We can't really escape the present moment—we can't escape now, because that's where we live. We simply are now. And so to think back to their past or to hope for their future---that wasn't a way to escape now. It was simply a way to be now, a way to live in the present moment. They were living in the present by ignoring it, hoping that the future would come to rescue them, and when it didn't, they gave up, turned back to the present and got along with their business.

I've talked before about our need to live in the present, because it's in the present that we meet God. If reality confronts us in the present moment—well, what is reality but God's gift to us—God's gift of time, of place---of the people who surround us and the things that we have to do. It's in the present that we come into relationship with reality, and so it's in the present that we find God's grace—that we're touched by it.

But it's also in the present that we find—that we discover our selves. It's not simply that reality is in the present---but we are, as well. Daniel Stern is a developmental psychologist—he's done monumental work on understanding our growth from infants into persons, but he also has begun to explore adult psychology----who we are now, and how we find ourselves---and he's written a book called *The Present Moment*. His basic argument is that we can discern the essentials of our psychology—who we are, what we care about, what motivates us, drives us, scares us---we can find these things simply by looking carefully at our actions in the moment. We don't need to look at our childhood, or consider a time of great angst...., we just need to look at an action now---an action in a moment, because we reveal ourselves so fully in that moment. In the moment, we're spontaneous---we just act---we don't think about who we should be or what we ought to be----we just act---and if we pay attention to those actions---to our spontaneity—then we learn about the tapes that play in our heads, the values that guide us at the deepest level. If we pay attention to the present moment and how we act in it, we get a sense of what's whole or broken in us, because in a moment, we don't have time to put on a mask---we simply are what we are.....

Now, if you've gone to sleep with all of this, let me bring you back.... I'm getting to the point of the sermon. It's actually a simple, lovely story that happened this past week. Some of you may have seen it on the news. Last Saturday, the women's softball teams from Western Oregon and Central Washington were playing a double header, and a trip to the NCAA Division II tournament was on the line. In a close game, I think it was the second game of the double header, Sarah Tucholsky came to bat for Western Oregon. She was a diminutive woman and had never hit a home run, but she took a hack at the second pitch she saw, and she whacked it out of the park. Exciting, given the stakes, the score, and the fact that it was a milestone for her, as well. Perhaps too exciting—when she rounded first base, she missed it, and so she turned quickly to touch it, and she ripped out her knee. She fell to the ground in pain, and she couldn't really move.

Now, for you non-competitors out there, the pain sounds horrible, but it wasn't the real tragedy of the situation. The real tragedy was that she couldn't move, and no one from her team could touch her, or else she would be out, and she couldn't have the home run or the score for her team unless she touched all the bases, but she couldn't move. The first base coach was just trying to coax her back to touch the bag—then they could call time-out, and come to get her. She's have to be satisfied with a single, but that was better than an out.

That's when the story happened. Mallory Holtman, a player for Central Washington, who had hit numerous home runs—she owned almost every record for her school---she asked if it would be legal if she and a teammate—players for the opposing team---she asked if they could pick up Sarah and carry her around the bases, so that she could touch the each bag with her foot. Could she then have her home run. It turns out that was legal---I don't know that the rule-makers ever imagined that scenario---and so that's what they did. The three of them, Sarah, and her two bearers from the other team, laughing most of the way. Central Washington ended up losing by two runs—one of them was the home run that they gave Sarah....

When asked about it later, Mallory said that it was just the thing to do.... Maybe. I know if I had been on the field, I would have been thinking about how lucky we were that her knee went out---they wouldn't get the run, and maybe we'd even get an out. That's why ESPN hasn't done any stories about me lately, I guess. But for Mallory, it was just the thing to do. There in the moment, in that present moment, without much deliberation, I think---she just responded out of what was deep within her. And her response was to reach out to this broken foe on the field, and to let her have her first home run. Mallory knew what it felt like to hit a home run, and she wanted Sarah to have this same experience.

That's why I've changed sports, I think. I used to play competitive sports primarily---mainly basketball---but what I found out about myself in those successive present moments is that desire to win---to come out on top, to be the best---it trumped everything else in my psyche---and winning was fun, but I found that it wasn't the path to long-term joy. If life was always about winning---if that was the motive that governed the succession of present moments that made up my life---then it was also always about the fear of losing, so that every moment was tinged with anguish.... Now I do yoga or kayak instead. I'm trying to remake my inner tapes---remake my present moments into a search for beauty, and reveling in community, and yearning for peace. I don't know if I'll be successful, but don't ask Cyndi what I'm like when the Cowboys are on TV.

This story, it's also why we need to pay attention to the present---again, not only do we find God there, but we also find out who we are---we are confronted with our reality there. Most of our present moments, they aren't that significant, but we can still learn about ourselves through them, and that's important, because we don't know when we'll have a moment that is significant. We don't know when we'll be confronted with a moment when we can either reach out a hand in love, or pull it back in self-centeredness---a moment when there won't be time to think, but when we'll just act out of our deepest impulses. Who will we be? What will we do?

Like the disciples, we need to know that life happens in the series of moments that string across the living present. Grace happens in that present—we happen in that present---to spend the present moment lost in the past or waiting for the future---it neglects both grace and ourselves—we can't afford that, and the world around us can't afford it. When we learn to be present to God and to our own hearts in the moment, then we can be present to our neighbors and their needs, as well. I don't know if that's something that Mallory Holtman knew, or if she was simply present from an intuitive sense, but I do know that she blessed not only Sarah, but all of us who learned from her the power of acting in the present. Amen.