A.M.D.G. May 27th, 2018 Text: Luke 24: 44-53

 Val’s Last Sunday at WPGUC

**Luke 24: 44-53**  Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah\* is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and were continually in the temple blessing God.

**In Our End Is Our Beginning**

Last Sunday after church, I went to see the retrospective of the paintings of Karen Dawes – a tribute to her and her art by her family on this first anniversary of her passing. When I arrived, I met several others from the church, including Ping and Rong, Joseph and Catherine and Clover. As we stood around chatting, Joseph made the comment to me: *“I hadn’t realized that you had been at West Point Grey United Church for 12 years. You know – the number 12 in Chinese culture is very significant. It symbolizes completion – the end of one cycle and the beginning of another.”* He reminded me that in the Chinese calendar, the years are each given the name of an animal – 12 in total. And when one cycle is finished, another begins.

Just one more among many things that I have learned from our Chinese community. I think I knew that at one level, because we have celebrated the lunar New Year for a number of years now. But Joseph’s comment put it into a meaningful perspective for me and provided a framework for looking back at my time here at West Point Grey United. I found it really helpful to see the 12 years of my ministry here symbolizing a sense of completion – the ending of one cycle and the beginning of another.

And they have been good years – filled with much laughter and tears, joys and sorrows, challenging times and joyful ones. We have accompanied one another on the faith journey – welcoming new people along the way, and saying goodbye to others. Together, we have explored what it means to be beloved children of God and followers of Jesus in the context of our own lives and the wider world of today. We have opened our doors and our hearts to those from other cultures – learning and growing in relationship, understanding, and friendship with each other. And along the way, we have supported and cared for one another, shared in worship and study and fellowship together, joined our voices in song, and our hands in doing the ministry to which we have been called in this community of faith, in this place. It has been a full and rich cycle of spiritual life together – and I am profoundly grateful for these last 12 years.

-2-

But as in all things – one cycle must end before a new one begins. That is the circle of life – and it holds both sorrow and a sense of loss, as well as the promise of hope and new possibility. Jesus knew that as well. In this Ascension reading today from the Gospel of Luke, the resurrected Christ is saying goodbye to his disciples and offering words of encouragement and blessing.

I am always struck by how, in Luke’s account of this story, Jesus chooses to leave from Bethany. It is a beloved place of memory for him. It is a place to which Jesus withdrew for rest and refreshment on more than one occasion; it is in Bethany that he found hospitality in the home of his close friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus; here that he received the gift of a woman’s anointing shortly before his death. Bethany has been a blessing for Jesus, and stands as a place of healing, restoration, hospitality and friendship.

And for Jesus’ companions, Bethany conjures memories that Jesus wants them to draw on in the days ahead. For them as well, it has been a place that has intertwined hospitality, friendship and a profound sense of the abiding presence of God – and he wants these gifts to remain with them, along with his spirit of love. And so, from this place of blessing, Jesus takes his leave, offering in turn, a blessing of his own as he goes. *“While he was blessing them,”* Luke tells us*, “Jesus withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.”* (24:51)

Isn’t it interesting to note that the blessing is part of the leaving. And somehow, the leaving is part of the blessing! His departure – and the way he enters into it – is part of Jesus’ final gift to his friends. In much the same way that Jesus tells Mary Magdalene on Easter morning not to hold onto him – here, at his Ascension, Jesus urges his disciples – his friends – to enter into a new relationship with him that will no longer depend on his physical presence, but will rely instead, on trusting in his love and growing into the people and community he has called them to become. It is time for them to become his body – to continue his transforming work of love in the world. “*You are my witnesses of these things,”* he reminds them, *“And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised”* (24:48-49) – that is, the Holy Spirit:

 - the Breath of God;

 - the Wind of change;

 - the Power of love;

 - the Guide to the future;

 - the Opener of doors.

-3-

Our scripture this morning reminds us that joyful, sorrowful, bittersweet; planned or unexpected; welcomed or resisted or grieved; no matter how a leave-taking happens, it always brings an invitation to blessing, and makes space for the Spirit to open new doors.

In the words of the hymn we sang earlier: “*In our end is our beginning, in our time, infinity; in our doubt, there is believing; in our life, eternity; from the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery – unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.”* The seeds of potential are always present in every ending – sending shoots of possibility into new beginnings. Things are never the same – but all the richness that has been gained from love and friendship given, from faith expressed, and cherished memories and experiences shared – is never lost. It becomes the fertile ground out of which something new begins to sprout and grow.

The last 12 years here at West Point Grey United have been a blessing to me in many ways – and I will always cherish the friendships I’ve made, the faith and ideas we’ve explored together, and the laughter and tears we’ve shared. These seeds of blessing I will carry with me on the next stage of my journey of life and faith. And I pray that the seeds of what we have been together here will also blossom and grow into the new beginnings to which ***you*** are called as a family of faith here at West Point Grey.

Thank you for the blessing you have been to me. And may God continue to guide and bless us both in the days ahead.