

Karen Hollis – Sermon
Luke 24:44-53 & Acts 1:1-11
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The Ascension

It's been a long time since I last saw "The Legend of Bagger Vance," but it was a favourite movie of mine long before I married a southerner. The story takes place in Savannah, GA, where Junah, a young golf champion returns home from WWI, unable to reconnect with his community. The depression is on and Junah's former girlfriend is trying to save the golf resort her father built before the stock market crash. She decides to hold a tournament and invite the 2 big names in southern golf at the time, but the town won't go along with it unless someone from Savannah plays in the match. You can guess that Junah ends up playing, but not without the help of a Christ character, known as Bagger Vance. He's a bit of a coyote trickster – you never quite know what he's going to do or say, but it is always grounded in love. Bagger Vance walks with Junah through the tournament, caddying for him, helping him through his struggles and finding teachable moments along the way; they walk together up until the very last hole when Vance says he has to go. "But I still need you." "No, no you don't." Bagger says his good byes, walks down to the beach and disappears. While Junah still feels the need to cling to Bagger Vance and his wisdom, Junah shows himself in the final shot how far he's come and how prepared he is to go from this place and live his life.

It is a natural instinct to hold on to the one who made all the difference. Perhaps you had a teacher or mentor or a workshop in your life that helped you with a piece of significant learning or growth. It can be challenging to take those first few steps from that place of security, and trust that learning as we develop and build on it. Jesus has said numerous times that he will be going to the Father, but I'm not sure the disciples have their response worked out.

When we consider the ascension of Jesus in the church, we often look at what Jesus is doing – it's often depicted with Jesus going upward. As I perused bulletin images this week, I found an abundance of images of Jesus, backlit and among the clouds, as depicted in Acts. I had a professor of church history in seminary who took this to the extreme – she was a really colourful personality – she asked the worship team to construct for her a cloud that they could suspend from the ceiling of the sanctuary and attach, hanging down from the cloud, a pair of legs, as if they're on their way up into the cloud. But in both accounts the description of the actual ascension is only a line or 2. “He led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven.” (Luke 24:50-51) That's it. The rest of the passages – both in Luke and Acts – are about the disciples preparing to carry on ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

Up to this point Jesus has been the focus of everything in the lives of the disciples. They're learning, serving, helping Jesus, healing people, and Jesus is the focal point. When something happens they look to him; when there is something to understand, they ask him; when they're afraid, they seek out Jesus and call on him to help. If Jesus stays, he will continue to be the focus of all the power and attention. But when he goes, they have to learn how to know Jesus' power in them and trust the Holy Spirit when they receive it.

As they stand there, Jesus is recapping for them what has happened to remind them of the bigger picture here; and that's great because they really want to know, what does this all mean for us? “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus didn't become king of Israel during his life, he didn't conquer the Roman empire in his resurrection, so will it come as ascends to heaven? They want change, they want certainty, they want life to be different, but they don't quite understand this pathway to that end. Jesus essentially says, there are

things you can know, and things you can't know. God is a mystery and you will never understand God's authority and action – stop trying to understand that, it's not worth your time or energy. But hear me when I say, you will receive the Holy Spirit – this is a knowable fact; this is going to happen. In this time of transition, focus on what you need to do: stay in Jerusalem, and wait for the Holy Spirit . . . and when it comes, embrace the gifts the Spirit brings.

The disciples have a long road ahead of them, figuring out how to serve in Jesus' name. When Jesus ascends, he makes room for them to live into what they have learned, and go that extra step of learning how to connect with Jesus' power on a spiritual level and use it to grow the kingdom of God. If Jesus hadn't left them, they would still be looking outside of themselves for answers, but when Jesus goes to heaven, he creates a void that invites, or rather motivates the disciples to live into who God call them to be, the people Jesus already knows they are. So they look to heaven, they pray and they wait.

They look to heaven. NT Wright has an alternative description of heaven and earth to our common up/down model. According to the scholar, the Biblical understanding of the relationship between heaven and earth is two (related) ways of looking at the same thing, like the shape of an object and what it's made out of. An example might be the mostly rectangular shape of a hymnal and mostly paper fibre it's made of. They are two (related) ways of looking at the same thing. So heaven and earth might be two different and interlocking dimensions, the one perhaps explaining the other.¹ In this Biblical understanding, heaven is right here; we can access it if we can just find our way through the veil. In this sense, my professor's image of legs going up through the cloud, at the very least, could use some updating. Wouldn't this cosmology of God make more sense, with Jesus was beyond the veil, rather than far away, up in the clouds? I think this is why I like Bagger Vance's exit at the end

¹ Acts for Everyone, NT Wright, p. 11.

of the movie, because he makes the transition in a thin place where one can imagine there is a spot thin enough for him to just slip through unnoticed. Some of the thinnest places on Gabriola I think are the beaches – they are the meeting place of land and sea, they show evidence of that relationship over the millennia; the beaches are home to a variety of critters who know a life of tides, a life of things hidden and things seen. Yes, the beaches know something about the veil in between.

In this Biblical cosmology of God, Jesus may be behind the veil, but is not far away. His power is available to move through us. The Holy Spirit will come to help us learn about the power of Jesus' name, help us know when and how to use it. So the disciples wait and they pray about what is to come; they look to heaven and say thanks be to God!