

No Hands but our Hands

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on May 28, 2017
based on Acts 1:1-11 and John 14:18*

“I will not leave you orphaned.”

Marva Dawn, author and theologian, says that Ascension Day is one of the few holy days that the world has not attempted to hijack for commercial purposes. You don't see any window displays at J.Crew or American Eagle or Victoria's Secret for that matter celebrating Ascension Day the way that Christmas or Easter or Mother's Day or even Pioneer Day is celebrated.

Nobody pays any attention to Ascension Day except our Roman Catholic and a few Episcopal friends. What are we to make of it? Imagining the disciples looking up as Jesus's bare feet, nail holes and all, disappear above them doesn't help much. Even Luke, who tells the story as we heard it read this morning, seems to try to divert his readers' attention from it by having the angels ask the disciples a curious question: “Why are you standing, looking to heaven?” Why indeed?

That said, for some people, this story about Jesus abruptly leaving the earth carries an emotional weight that neither Easter nor Christmas carries. I'm speaking of people who have, for one reason or another, felt abandoned in their life. For them there is nothing more painful than the feeling of being left alone; utterly alone to fend for themselves. It's not an unusual story.

Felix Salten's children's story, *Bambi*, has been a favorite of some children and despised by others since 1923 when it was first published. Walt Disney's illustrators and animators got hold of it and transformed Bambi and his friends into ridiculously cute forest creatures just as World War II was getting going. There's Bambi, a fawn; there's his protective mother, and strong father, a mighty stag --mostly absent until the chips are down; and Bambi's friend, Thumper, the hyperactive rabbit.

And there's the part of the story that makes everyone sad, of course, when Bambi's mother dies, shot by a hunter, and Bambi finds himself suddenly alone. “Oh my gosh,” children think at some point. “What if that happened to me?”

And, of course, it DOES happen to most all of us, sooner or later, and when it happens, it is a landmark event, a turning point in our life's journey. Psychologists know that abandonment is a primal human fear, from our birth on. It comes in many shapes and forms. And, of course, it is an appropriate topic for a Memorial weekend sermon.

Tom Long tells the story of Jack Casey, a paramedic and ambulance driver. When he was a child, Casey had to have dental surgery that required general anesthesia, and he was terrified.

A nurse said to him, “Don’t worry, I’ll be right beside you, no matter what happens.” She was true to her word. When he woke up, she was there and everything was okay.

Years later he became a paramedic and ambulance driver. One day Casey was called to the scene of a horrific traffic accident. The driver was pinned upside down beneath his pickup truck, terrified, crying out that he was afraid of dying.

Casey crawled inside the cab of the truck to reach him even though gasoline was now dripping down on both of them. Rescue workers were beginning to use power tools to cut the metal and one stray spark could have produced a catastrophe. Jack crawled in beside the man and said, “Look, don’t worry. I’m right here with you. I’m not going anywhere,” exactly what the nurse had told him years before.

When it was all over and the man had recovered, he said to Casey, “You were an idiot: you know that thing could have exploded, and we’d both have been burned up.” Jack told him, “There was no way in the world I was going to leave you. It’s not in my nature to leave people to fend for themselves.” (Thomas G. Long, “Preaching from Memory to Hope,” p. 49).

Fear of abandonment is also called, separation anxiety, and it is the context of a passage of scripture that is paired today with the story of Jesus’s ascension. Scholars call this section of the Gospel according to John, the “Farewell Discourses.” The occasion is the last evening of Jesus’s life.

Jesus and his disciples are at table, at what would be their Last Supper. It is time for summing up. The occasion is pregnant with significance. John gives it several chapters and there, in a long prayer, Jesus asks God to protect his friends, to keep them together, to give them joy, and to send them into the world in his name.

The line he says that touches readers the deepest is this, “I will not leave you orphaned.”

I think his friends must have been in a full separation anxiety. They were acting and sounding like frightened children. “Why are you leaving us, Jesus? Where are you going? Why can’t we come along? Is this all really necessary?”

Can't we all just slip out into the night; head north, back to the safety of Galilee, and be together for the rest of our lives? We can't imagine life without you."

In the face of that Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned." It's a straight on response, is it not? His words address the root of their fears point blank.

You know, the Bible regularly uses parental language to talk about God, and that language is not exclusively masculine. God in the Bible is not only described as a king, a father, but also a mother – a mother who cannot, and will not, abandon her nursing child. That's precisely how it is put in Isaiah 49. Jesus speaks of God as a waiting father running down the road to welcome a prodigal son home, and also a mother hen sheltering her chicks under her wings.

"I will not leave you orphaned," he tells his frightened, anxious friends.

A decade or two later, the Apostle Paul will begin to think and write about what Jesus means and what difference Jesus Christ makes to the human heart. He too will use parental language. In fact, he uses adoption language. In Christ, he says, God adopts us as beloved children.

That is a promise and an image we remember every time we baptize an infant: "Sarah Jane," we say, "you are a beloved child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism. You belong to Jesus Christ forever."

Tuesday I am going out to Cape Cod to visit my daughter, Margaret, for a few days. She is 28 and she's expecting her first child. And, as many of you know, Margaret is adopted. That's not something I think about very often. I just think about her as my daughter. But it is an important part of her life story, and mine.

In a world where way too many children are unwanted, abused, ignored, abandoned—literally abandoned: newborns left on the doorsteps of hospitals and churches, in railroad stations and worse, adoption is literally redemptive, life saving. I feel so grateful to have been given such a wonderful daughter to raise.

Margaret's birth-mother was in a terrible position when Margaret was developing within her, and Margaret's adoptive mother and I were thrilled to help out – and we all have a wonderful relationship built around a terrific young woman who is now a nurse, and who is making the world a better place every day of her precious life.

“I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus said. “I will not abandon you. I will be with you forever.” Those words mean a lot to me.

Some great teachers of spirituality down through the centuries remind us of the nurturing parental relationships Jesus had with his friends. Sometimes they use strikingly graphic language to make the point.

Julian of Norwich, for instance, a mystic who lived in the thirteenth century has said, *In our birthing, our mother uses incomparable tenderness to protect us. . . . But even if our earthly mother could allow her child to perish, our heavenly mother, Jesus, cannot allow us, or any of his children to perish.*

You know, if you live long enough, there comes a time when you eventually become an orphan. Our parents die, and we are forced to go on without them. One day you were someone’s daughter or son, and then they’re gone. And then *we* become the “parents.” When that happens, it is one of life’s major events.

And sometimes it happens before the end of life; that is, when a parent descends into dementia. In many ways it is more difficult, more painful, to become an orphan that way. It is a difficult situation for all—for the patient, of course, but also for the adult children who assume responsibility for care and, in a very real sense, reverse roles and become their mother’s or father’s parent.

Linda Rooney, a teacher and author, wrote an article for *America*, the fine Jesuit journal, about her experience with her ninety-year-old mother, whom she is losing to Alzheimer’s. She wrote, “Though the physical care required is constant and at times challenging, it is the emotional death that I grieve—the loss of connectedness to the woman who has always been the mainstay of my life.” Rooney reflects, “My mother has forgotten me, and every time I look at her my heart weeps. If my mother forgot me, will God? Is there any comfort left in contemplating God’s mother love?”

Rooney goes on to say, there is. She adds this intriguing thought: “God’s memory is not brain-based but heart-based. It embraces all the nuances of who I am as a human being and stores (as only a creator can) each cell of my existence.”

The ancient psalmist wrote the following:
*You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You are acquainted with all my ways*

Rooney says that as she looks at her unresponsive mother, she still trusts in God whose very nature is to not forget any one of us, ever. This thought consoles her.

She goes on: “Perhaps, physical co-creator of my being that she is, my mother, too, stores somewhere within the unconditional love she always gave me, a memory of me so blessed that it need not be spoken to be known.

“She may not be able to tell me that I am her daughter, but that does not mean she does not remember the child of her womb” (*Context*, edited by Martin E. Marty, May 2009).

Maybe human memory is not brain-based but heart-based, like God’s memory. I’d like to think so.

I am not a clinical psychologist, of course, but I believe that human consciousness is so complex and multilayered that somewhere deep inside there remains the best of the person we were and still are, and maybe our strongest and deepest loves are still there, regardless of what may be happening with the electrical circuits of our brain.

A Presbyterian minister who has written extensively about Alzheimer’s, John Morgan, argues, “Alzheimer’s takes away the mind and sometimes the physical ability, but it cannot take away the heart or the soul.” (“Trapped Souls,” *Presbyterians Today*, July/August 2007).

Pastors know that sometimes people who don’t communicate at all become responsive to words of scripture or hymns that are remembered deeply in the heart.

I had that experience myself with a dear woman from my first congregation who could say nothing at all, late in dementia. After spending a few minutes with her, I held both her hands in mine and, on instinct, I began repeating the words of the 23rd Psalm. She joined in immediately and repeated the whole thing with me, word for word. It was all there, deep within her.

I would suggest that even as we lose a parent to Alzheimer’s, we are not orphans, because deep within, there remains the love that once could express itself. And when we lose a dear one or friend in the same way, the essence of who they were in relationship with us, gone on the surface, remains true and deep in the heart.

And when we lose parents, it is lovely to believe that the relationship that created us, nurtured us, and blessed us along the way, never ends, because God remembers them and us. Beneath all of that is Jesus' promise, "I will not leave you orphaned."

Let me go back to the words of the angels there at the ascension of Jesus: how they said, "Why are you standing looking to heaven?" They were not just trying to divert the attention of the disciples from a painful moment in their lives. They were underscoring that an era had passed, yes, but a new one was opening; an era in which we who share Jesus's values and compassion are being commissioned by his leaving, to pick up where he left off.

St Teresa of Avila once said,

Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion looks out on the world, yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.

Jesus promises to not leave us orphaned. In mysterious ways he is still with us, but that being said, we are meant to be part of that mystery. We are meant to be his eyes, and hands and feet and heart. What a responsibility, yes, and what a privilege, too.

Amen