

FROM HEART TO HEART
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Ascension teaches us to let go of what we cling to

by Mary Sharon Moore

Talk about tough assignments. This one was a doozy. The voicemail message said, “The bishop would like you to lead him and the clergy of the diocese in a three-day retreat to prepare them for Easter.”

How do I prepare clergy and a bishop for Easter? I asked myself. I knew that I could not talk about “Easter” separate from Jesus’ ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the early church at Pentecost.

As I reread the Gospel stories of Easter, I was startled to find not joy among Jesus’ disciples but grieving, confusion, mistaken identity, and that devastating emptiness as two disciples walked away from Jerusalem toward Emmaus, a town not really on the map.

I think I startled these retreatants when I suggested the obvious: Let go the forced happiness of Easter, and help your people to acknowledge the losses and sorrowing of the Easter event as they try to square their faith with their own losses and sorrows.

Nowhere in the Easter season is the experience of loss more acute than at Jesus’ departure—the Ascension. Why did he have to go? Why does anyone I love have to go?

As a child I imagined the Ascension a theatrical device to move the story along. But Jesus’ ascension was a real departure, a real and painful letting go for his followers. The Ascension matters to me because it gives meaning to my losses, and dignity to my grieving over them. In the Gospels the

first hint of loss came in Jesus’ command to Mary Magdalene, “Do not cling to me!” as she fell at his feet in worship beside the empty tomb. She and the other disciples loved this man. He meant everything to them.

Jesus’ ascension teaches me that I too must let go what I cling to in order to receive something greater. Over the course of many Easter seasons I have had to let go of lesser, even lifeless things—the steady paycheck attached to an emotionally toxic workplace; the dream of a relationship and the hope for married life; corrosive worry about how to provide for my needs, how to make my way in a world which felt like a heartless machine.

Catholic theologian Ronald Rolheiser, in his book “The Holy Longing,” offers a helpful snapshot of the real work of the Easter season in which Jesus’ ascension is situated: Good Friday, he notes: “the loss of life—real death.” Easter Sunday: “the reception of new life.” The time between Easter and the Ascension: “a time for readjustment to the new and for grieving the old.” Ascension: “Letting go of the old and letting it bless you, and the refusal to cling.” Pentecost: “the reception of new spirit for the new life that one is already living.”

Jesus’ ascension is not part of an engaging tale, a well built story. Jesus’ ascension honors my life in the losses and the sorrowing, and prepares me to receive with dignity something immeasurably greater.