



# SAINT LUKE'S

HOW TO GO DOWN THE STEEP FLIGHT OF STAIRS

THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

YEAR A

ACTS 17:22-31

PSALM 66:7-18

1 PETER 3:13-22

JOHN 14:15-21

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As most of you know, unlike Mother Emily with baby William, *my* two kids are grown up now, both in their twenties. And though some of us with greyer hair are prone to questioning how “grown up” that really is, I am not too nostalgic for the real baby days. I enjoy my kids more and more the older they get, and I look forward to watching them come into their own as they continue to mature. But sometimes I do think about when they were young, and reading this morning’s passage in John’s gospel brought to mind some memories from when my daughter was tiny.

Back when Anna was two, we moved from an apartment in the Bronx to a house in Yonkers. Like many parents, we wanted a back yard with space for our kids to run around and play. We lived in that house for 15 years, and Anna did come to love it. But the initial transition to it was *really tough*.

I remember that Anna wore a knitted cap 24/7 for about six months during that transition ~ she would only allow me to take it off her head when it was bath time. *That’s* how hard it was for her. Philippe and I did a lot of things to help her prepare, both before and after the move. One idea we had was to make a scrapbook with photos of our old apartment and her room, along with photos of moving trucks, cardboard boxes, and some images of the new house and yard. We read that “storybook” with her several times in the weeks leading up to the actual move.

Once we got to the house, we concentrated on setting up her room first ~ arranging it as closely as possible to her old room in the apartment. We also made sure that her brother’s room was nearby.

And speaking of her brother, five year old Aidan was an amazing help with one particularly tricky feature of the new house ~ a very steep flight of “back stairs” that led down into the kitchen. Anna was fine going up, but terrified (with good reason) of coming down. Aidan came up with a brilliant way of showing her how to conquer that fear. He started her at the bottom of the stairs, and had her climb up just one. He stood beside her as she came down. Then he had her go up two stairs – and she came down that. They kept on going, climbing only one step higher every time, until suddenly, she was up at the top, confident that she could come all the way down. He was very patient with her, and it was really great – she never had a problem with that staircase again.

The common theme of these remembrances is pretty clear, right? Transitions cause anxiety. That’s true when we are two. It’s still true in our 20s and 30s. And here at 55, watching the changes happening in our country, I am finding it true as well.

So how do we find relief from our anxiety? To me, that’s where we are with John’s Gospel today, searching for that relief. This text is John’s story of Jesus responding to our anxiety. This text is a story of Jesus holding our hands and preparing us for a transition. This text is about Jesus helping us learn how to go down the super steep staircase.

We’ve already seen Jesus do this earlier in John’s Gospel. The passage about Lazarus being raised from the dead is a similar story of Jesus preparing us ~ using that instance to get us ready for his own transition ~ a

practice story of death and resurrection that prefigures his own. In that story, Jesus models for us how to respond in the face of his own impending death ~ he stops the fear driven machine of ritualized mourning and instead asks us to slow down – to pay attention ~ to the sadness, yes ~ Jesus does weep ~ but also to the aliveness, the hope, the promise of new possibility.

Where do we find that possibility in this passage? If we look at it in context, we notice that it is the center of an “inclusio”, a kind of scriptural sandwich. In verses 1-14, before today’s passage, Jesus speaks of his departure from the disciples. In verses 25-31, after today’s passage, he does the same. *Our* section, the part in the middle, is the heart of the matter – the nugget we are called to internalize and hear. This is where Jesus reveals the reason *why* we should not let our hearts be troubled. Jesus is preparing us, one step at a time, for what will happen when he is gone. Jesus is speaking of the new role we will take on when he is gone – he is holding our hands and showing us the way. Not only will we *not* be abandoned. But *we* will be the ones who manifest his continued presence in the world.

How do we know this?

The direct identification of Jesus with God the Father is a theme John has already explored frequently in this gospel. But here, at verse 20, is the first time that he explicitly stretches that identification to include the disciples (and by inference us) as well.

“On that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

Jesus tells us that we too are one with him, just as he is one with God. That we will, with God’s help, continue his loving work in the world, making the kingdom manifest in our very flesh – just as he made God’s love manifest in his own flesh.

Do we not see his tender care for us in his healing of the sick?  
Do we not see his tender care for us in his feeding of the hungry?  
Do we not see his tender care for us in the washing of our feet?  
Does he not command *us* to continue that loving work in the world?  
Jesus’ impending death and departure do not lead to despair, but to renewal – to resurrection – to new birth.

“I will not leave you desolate,” he says, “I will come to you.”

So, here we are, standing at the top of the steep staircase.  
And here is Jesus, holding our hands lovingly, helping us to learn how to go down.

In a few days time, it will be Ascension, and we will remember Jesus’ second departure from the disciples – when his risen physical body ascended and was no longer visible in the world. From then, it will be a short ten days of liminality before the other event spoken of in this passage: the coming of the Holy Spirit, the paraclete. On that day, when we baptize new

Christians, we will once again have completed our Easter transition, from those who *follow* the one who is one with God to those who **ARE** one with the one who is one with God.

This passage, and this Easter season, lead us on that journey, one careful step at a time. They remind us through outward sacramental actions of the internal, communal, and embodied Grace that molds and shapes and educates our hearts daily. We are held so tenderly at every step – our tiny, crumb covered sticky hands enfolded by God’s loving ones – the ones that refuse to forget us – the ones that refuse to leave us abandon us to struggle on our own.

This passage reminds us how lovingly and gently we are held.

This passage reminds us that we are never alone.

This passage assures us that we are, indeed, the body of Christ.



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