

June 2, '19, Anthon UMC, Acts 1:1-11, "Sometimes You Gotta Let Go"

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"Sometimes you gotta let go." It's not human nature to be glad to let go of anything much, except maybe an electric fence? We even hold fast to a grudge...and especially a bad habit. Letting go of anything you have believed in or bonded to, for good or for evil, is one of the hardest things any of us will have to do. But one thing is for sure, we all have to let go of something we don't want...some day. For interest, these days I find myself walking through this church or sitting in my office thinking, "How do I let go of this place and these people who I have loved pastoring?" And yet God is saying, "Let go," and I will be obedient.

I'm a clinger. We are all clingers. Once your mind, body or emotions get a hold of something, it becomes part of you, and it is normal to hold onto it tightly. Some things are good to hold on to, but some are bad such as alcohol and drugs and addictions of every kind. Very few of us give up those willingly and without a fight. Now some parents may be a bit relieved to let go of their kids after high school graduation, but most are unhappy their family unit is scattering. Ever have a good friend move away, or the love of your life dump you? Life is full of the letting go and partings. And the forced letting go that comes with a death. Well that is a parting that causes us to wail on our outsides at first, and our insides for a lifetime. And it's hard to let go of beliefs you have held onto in your mind about anything – hard to let old thoughts and let old ways go. What we were taught all our lives, stays stuck in us like an old familiar song playing over and over and we resist changing it to a new unfamiliar song. Nope, letting go is not easy and we need real help and comfort at these times of such change. Change as is

going on all over our world today. To face it takes more strength than we possess. So it was in Jesus' time. Letting go of the familiar was coming for the disciples and they couldn't stop it.

The disciples had to let go in their minds of so many preconceived notions concerning Jesus as the Messiah. It was only the proof of the resurrection that kept them from letting go of their faith in Him for good. The Disciples, like their contemporaries, had been hoping for a King to restore the throne of David. They had been clinging to the belief that God would send someone to conquer the Romans and claim their rightful place in history. They based their hope on the scripture they read each week, stories of promises God had made to the people of Israel for hundreds, if not thousands of years. They went to the temple and prayed for a Redeemer to come and fulfill their hopes and dreams of a worldly king. They thought they were "right on" in how God was going to do this. They hung on to this hope that Jesus was The One, until Jesus' death. Then, they let go of that belief that He was the one to "restore King David's throne and that they would have an earthly place of honor beside him." With that hope gone they gave it up. They folded up their tents and hid out.

Then Jesus came back from the dead. They grabbed hold of their hopes again. Jesus was back. Joy was back. They began to believe again in their old expectations. In the 40 days after his resurrection and before His ascension, Jesus again taught them. But up to the day of his ascension, they were still asking him such misguided questions as, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" "Is this the time when you will make Israel great again?"

Have you ever tried to change someone's mind about something...like something political or a social issue or a religious belief? You gave it your best shot and you thought you had succeeded, and then they asked you some question that let you know, they had not let go of their original belief at all? These disciples obediently walked with Jesus to the Mount of Olives where the ascension would take place, still believing He was going to be there physically for them to follow to greatness.

But in the Gospel of Luke we read that he opened their minds. Ah for an open mind, for the power to let go of old beliefs that have served us well in the past, going forward to where God is calling us to go in the future. I like the bumper sticker that says "Brains are like umbrellas. They work better when they are open."

Still there are some things we cannot know while on this earth. It was not for the disciples to know what God had planned for them or for Israel, and the same is true for the future of any of us personally, or as a church.

There is a tension that exists between listening to the voice of God in times of change and hanging in there when change comes about. We like to think we're right, so we don't need to change our minds. But the Disciples thought they were right too. Not all change of beliefs is good, not all change of beliefs is right. But if we close our minds, God may not be able to speak to us or influence our actions and God may have to do something dramatic to open our minds to his way.

It was pretty dramatic when Jesus ascended into heaven leaving the disciples to see with their own eyes, he was really physically gone from them and it was for a new and powerful purpose. Some things you have to see with your own eyes to believe they are happening. It was time for Jesus to leave them with an assignment, a promise to

return, just as he went up, in a cloud of glory. His work was done. Soon it would be up to them. They had to let go of their physical dependence upon Jesus and take hold of the bigger picture of going forward in his name and power to spread his message on this . They would be going against some tremendous odds...odds bigger than their own strength.

Think about this. If Jesus had stayed on earth, he would have continued to face human restrictions and limitation. His travel would have been limited. His influence would have been confined to the area he could walk in ancient Palestine. If Jesus had stayed on earth, we might have never heard of him! And neither would millions of others!

But Jesus has ascended. And because of it, when the Holy Spirit fell, his power has been released into all the world. He is no longer bound by time and space and distance. Because Jesus rules alongside the Father in heaven he empowers people the world over to respond to his message and share it with others.

That's the kind of power the church is to have, because Jesus has ascended into heaven and released the Holy Spirit into the faithful all over the world! How much faith in us, that must have taken on Jesus' part...to let us go on our own, like trusting our sons or daughters to take over our family business as we retire to Florida. Are they quite ready? We've trained them but they've made some foolish mistakes before. Can they carry on? However, with us gone, letting go is a bold but necessary move. For Jesus and for us, there was no other plan to save the world and He was placing the weight of it squarely on our shoulders and away he went to send help.

You'd think with all that responsibility being passed on, Ascension day would be a bigger celebration in the church. You don't hear it talked about all that much but it should be, for it was a cosmic event, a pivotal point. Maybe we can't let go in our scientific minds of our certainty that no one defies the law of gravity, and to talk about someone who did, means we might sound a bit crazy. So how on earth then, can you talk about the resurrection which defies the law of, "Once dead, there's no coming back." Remember Jesus now had his resurrected body unfettered by the laws of nature. We need to let go of such doubts this couldn't happen and celebrate that the ascension confirms the good news that "the risen Jesus Rules from on high." That's the church's claim on Ascension Day. There's no one, or no thing, stronger or more powerful than the one who came from the Father and returns to the Father.

And if you can't let go of the law of gravity rule, then hold this thought, "What goes up must come down." And isn't that exactly what Jesus said he would do? Jesus is in charge. Jesus has promised he will come back again someday and in the meantime the Holy Spirit is coming down all the time, like rain on the spirits of those who will receive him. In letting go of the picture they had of Jesus the earthly king, the disciples needed comfort and help. Jesus gave them exactly that when he promised that when they let go of Him as they physically knew him, he would send the Holy Spirit as the Helper to them and as the Comforter. What is so amazing is that they would have all the power they would need to spread the Gospel to every creature that came into their path. They would be like Jesus in that they would overcome anything that stood in their way and they would be fearless in doing it. But right now they were gazing up into

heaven, not wanting to let go of the one who could protect them and guide them and teach them.

They had a task to accomplish, a task Jesus had carefully explained to them, but they couldn't quite let go of him. A couple of angels had to shoo them away, get them going off the spot where they last saw Jesus, where they were resisting letting him go, trying to catch just one more look at the bottoms of His feet. Couldn't you just see them more or less shrug their shoulders and lament, "Now what do we do? How can we continue with Jesus gone?"

In some ways the church hasn't changed much in 2,000 years. Oh, we're much larger and much more organized, and wealthier, and the power of the gospel has embraced an amazingly diverse rainbow of colors and languages and culture. On the outside, the church looks much different than it did on that hilltop near Jerusalem where Jesus departed from his followers long ago.

But on the inside, we're much the same when we have to let go of something we know. Now, what do we do? Sometimes it's overwhelming to be the church of Jesus Christ. The world's needs are so great. The task is so huge. Our church is so small and the ground around us seems to be shaking with indecision about right and wrong. Our resources seem so meager. The fear of failure, the fear of risking, the fear of letting go of the familiar for the something different can make you want to cut and run. What can we do? What can we do?

By our own power, nothing. Not a darn thing. We don't have the might, or the will or the fortitude, or the power to carry the gospel to the world, let alone keep our own boat

afloat as we strive to make a difference. No, we don't have that power anymore than those first disciples. We too need to let go of thinking we are in charge of the future.

We don't have that power—but Jesus does! And Jesus hasn't taken his power away with him to heaven. Jesus rules! Jesus is in charge! Jesus is Lord. His power is still at work and next week at Pentecost we will rejoice in that power being given to us.

We need to ask ourselves the question, "Are we as Jesus' disciples in the U.S. redeeming the time until Jesus returns? Are we fulfilling the ministries he has given to the church?" We have been placed where we are for a purpose. The angelic beings asked, "Why do you stand here looking into the sky?" It was the earth, not the sky, which they should be occupied with – to be witnesses not stargazers! Our calling is not upwards in nostalgia of what Jesus did, but outwards in compassion to a lost world that needs Jesus today.

It's time for us to let go of our preconceived notions of what God wants in our lives, letting go of anything that holds us back to witnessing in the power of Jesus Christ whether it be a change of pastors or a new way of doing church...the results are up to God. And so the final question of the day is, "Are there things that you and I are hanging onto that we need to let go of to better serve Christ?" If so, let's ask God to help us to let go of them and trust that he is already here, helping us in a new venture of faith.

