

“WON'T COMPUTE”

Acts 1:6-14

It is about 11:00 at night, the phone rings and I am asked to go to our friends' house to take care of their young child. I rush with my pajamas on to offer whatever help I can to this family. The mother was found by the police and then taken to the hospital. This was her second suicide attempt. The father had to go to the hospital but needed someone to be with their daughter. I sit in their living room praying for help, for comfort and for healing. What will become of this family? How will they make it with all of this pain in their lives? I pray and find myself asking: Where is God in all of this? How will this family know and experience God's love as they walk in the shadow of the valley of death?

Where do we look for God? Where do we see God and what do we see? What is our image of God? These seem like theological questions that are good to answer but do not change a lot in our lives. There are many images and experiences of God in the Bible itself. What if your image of God is that of an eagle and mine is that of the wind? What if you see God more in nature, while I see God in music? Would that make a big difference in the way we go about faith and life?

While I don't believe that our definitions of God make a huge difference in our faith, I do believe that the way we experience and see God in our lives makes an incredible difference. Where and how we experience God is of utmost importance to our faith and purpose in life. We are here on earth to learn to receive and give God's love. So, the way we experience this love and share it is at the core of our life. Father Pedro Arrupé, a Jesuit leader of the 20th century, once wrote, “Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the mornings, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.”

In our Bible story today from Acts 1, we hear about the disciples of Jesus themselves having to learn about where to find God. Jesus as they knew him in his earthly life was about to leave them. They experienced the resurrection, but were having to say a final goodbye to Jesus and for the first time really knew that they had to continue on with the mission without their leader being physically present with them. They have known God's presence through their experience of Jesus. So, the crisis comes for them when they have to let go of that experience of God to move in faith to a new path. Their reaction was to ask a question that would help them cling to the past. They were not ready to move on that quickly. They asked Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?” It is a two-for-one question that simultaneously asks about the past and the future. “Jesus, we want to know about the future; are you about to make things better? Jesus, we love the past; will you make things the way they were in the good old days?” It is also noteworthy that the apostles assume that any changes will be brought about by Jesus. They ask Jesus what he will do; they do not ask him for instructions about what they should do. Even though they were with Jesus for a long time, they were still looking for him to do things for them and to be the political leader of Israel. Their dominant image of God was that of a king living in the sky and directing their affairs. They expected salvation to come to them from the outside. They wanted a savior that would solve all of their problems.

Their image and experience of God didn't fit with their experience of Jesus. Jesus redirects their attention away from the calendar and what they want him to do. He tells them about their responsibilities. He promises that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit and tells them to use that power to be his witnesses. But even after he disappears from their sight, they stay looking at the sky. After Jesus ascended into a cloud, the apostles were joined by two men in white robes. We have met them before when Luke introduced them at the empty tomb. Most biblical scholars believe that Luke and Acts were written by the same author. “But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them...the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’” (Lk 24:2-5) Now, here they are again at Jesus' ascension and they are acting in much the same way that they did on Easter morning. Now they ask, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” So the disciples/stooges are standing gawking up at the place where Jesus has disappeared when they get the question that helps wake them up to realize

that their mission is not to keep waiting for God to act and save them, but for them to join God's mission in the world.

Many of us are looking for Jesus in the wrong places; our faith lives consist too much of standing and looking up. We could use a wakeup call, a jolt, or a pie in the face to get us to look at the world around us and those who are standing next to us. Where do we look for God? Where do we see God? Do we see God in the clouds or in our daily life? Do we expect God to solve our problems or do we join God in responding to the world's pain and needs? The American philosopher Joseph Campbell says: "But if you read 'Jesus ascended to heaven' in terms of its metaphoric connotation, you see that he has gone . . . not into outer space but inward space, to the place from which all being comes . . . to the kingdom of heaven within. The images are outward, but their reflection is inward . . . It is a metaphor of returning to the source." The Ascension of Christ is not about looking up to heaven. It is about what is right here within and around us.

With that understanding of Jesus' ascension, what does witnessing to the resurrection look like today, two thousand years later? I think the poet Wendell Berry points us in the right direction when he suggests that we offer a powerful, radical "witness" to Jesus when we "*live resurrection*" in his *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*.

"Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.

And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.

When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it...
Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection."

This is what happened to the disciples as they stopped looking up and started practicing resurrection. The whole book of Acts is about their ministry telling stories that bid its living readers to continue what Christ began in their own time and to the end of history. Barbara Brown Taylor, a well-known theologian and writer, once wrote "With nothing but a promise and a prayer, those eleven disciples consented to BE the church, and nothing was ever the same again, beginning with them. The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the converts became missionaries, the healed became healers, and the disciples became APOSTLES, witnesses to the Risen Christ... and SO, they STOPPED looking up toward heaven, and looked at each OTHER instead. And THEN, they got ON with the business of being the church."

If our experience of God leads us to do or think of things that "won't compute," it is because we are able to experience God in our daily life, in our own selves and in our relationship with others and the whole world, and not just when we look up to heaven. In your bulletin today for the Faith in Action piece, there is an

invitation to a spiritual practice called the *Examen*. This comes to us from St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, who was a very practical man when it came to prayer. He recommended to his brothers a daily method of examining their lives so that they might better serve the Lord. St. Ignatius taught that the key to a healthy spirituality was twofold: Find God in all things and constantly work to gain freedom to cooperate with God's will. The Examen helps us pay closer attention to God's presence and work in our daily life and our world. It is a simple practice because all you have to do is to remember to ask yourself everyday: Where did I see God today? Or where I did not see God today? Even though this practice might seem simple, it has the incredible power to help us pay closer attention to God's presence in our lives not just during our prayer time when we are looking up to heaven, but also during the ordinary events of our lives. This kind of awareness helps us to join God's action wherever and whenever we are called to it.

The famous writer, Elie Wiesel, watching the Nazis hang an innocent child in the hell of the holocaust, wrote in his book "*Night*", "Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting. 'Bare your heads!' yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping, 'cover your heads!' Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive... But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive... For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed. Behind me I heard [a] man asking, 'where is God now?' And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is God? God is hanging here on this gallows.'" Amen.

attached: Faith in Action

Faith in Action

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius (1491-1556) urged that all be taught the Examen, a daily examination of our deepest feelings and desires. He called these feelings our consolations (what connects us with God, others and ourselves) and desolations (what disconnects us). He believed that God would speak to us through these feelings and desires. It's not surprising that this saint felt so strongly about the Examen -- this prayer practice changed him from a wild soldier to a pilgrim walking barefoot to Jerusalem. The Examen helps us:

- Acknowledge sad or painful feelings and hear how God is speaking to us through them.
- Overcome a pessimistic outlook by encouraging us to notice the good in each day.
- Tell the truth about who we truly are and what we need, rather than who we think we should be.
- Become aware of seemingly insignificant moments that ultimately can give direction for our lives.

Preparation: You may wish to light a candle. Do whatever helps you to experience God's loving presence with you. Take a few deep breaths. Breathe in God's love, and when you breathe out, fill the space around you with it.

STEP ONE

Ask God to bring to your awareness the moment today for which you are most grateful or where you experienced God's presence.

- If you could relive one moment, which one would it be?
- When were you most able to give and receive love today?
- Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so good.

Breathe in the gratitude you felt and receive life again from that moment.

STEP TWO

Ask God to bring to your awareness the moment today for which you are least grateful or where you felt God to be absent.

- When were you least able to give and receive love?
- Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so difficult.
- Relive the feelings without trying to change or fix it in any way.

Take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just as you are.

STEP THREE Be grateful for all that you have experienced.