

Feast of the Ascension, Year C
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Saint James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

Nine years is a long time to wait for someone to come back.
Especially if you're a dog.
Nine dog-years is most of a lifetime.
A lifetime spent waiting, faithfully.

In the world's long history of "good dogs,"
the stories of the faithfulness of our best friends
are many, and the tales are often extraordinary.
But there is one story that I think stands out above all others.

That's the story of Hachiko,
a Japanese akita,
remembered for his remarkable loyalty to his owner,
Hidesaburo Ueno,
a professor at the Tokyo Imperial University.

Hachiko was born in 1923
and was adopted by the professor as a puppy.
Every day, the professor would take the train into work.
And at the end of every day,
Hachiko would come to meet him at the train station,
and they would walk home together.

Until one day, when Hachiko was a year and a half old.
On that sad day, the professor suffered a cerebral hemorrhage while at work.
He died, without ever returning to the train station
at which Hachiko waited.

And yet every day
for the next nine years, nine months and 15 days,
Hachiko awaited his owner's return,
appearing at the station
precisely at the time the professor's train was due in.

Hachiko attracted the attention of other commuters.
Not everybody was friendly to the dog.
But others applauded Hachiko's faithfulness,
and as stories about him were written,
he became something of a national sensation.
His vigil was held up as an example of faithfulness
for children to follow.
Hachiko became a national symbol of loyalty.

Hachiko finally died in 1935 at the age of 11.
He was cremated,
and his ashes were placed beside those of his beloved master.
But his fur was preserved
and was stuffed and mounted,
and is on permanent display
at the National Science Museum of Japan.

In 2009, a movie came out called *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*,
which is based on the story of Hachiko,
though it fictionalizes the account,
and moves it to the United States instead of Japan.

Of course, not every dog attains the fame of Hachiko.
But I bet just about every dog owner
could tell stories of the faithfulness of a beloved pet.
When it comes to faithfulness, it's hard to beat a dog.
How wonderful is it to come home at the end of long day,
and know you will be greeted at the door
with joyful tail-wagging and happy barks and kisses.
No one is ever happier to see you than your dog,
whether you've been gone a few hours or a few days.
Time to a dog seems meaningless.
They don't know where you've been.
They're just ecstatic that you're back.
Oh, to be as faithful as our dogs.

Today, we are observing the Feast of the Ascension.
Actually, the date of the feast was on Thursday,
exactly 40 days after the Resurrection of our Lord.
But we moved the observation of the feast to today

because I don't think many people would have come to church on Thursday.

Ascension Day is a major holiday of the church,
though often as not,
the preacher is happy to overlook this day,
because it's sort of a strange story
that tends to rub 21st century Christians the wrong way.

The accounts we hear of Christ's Ascension,
both in Acts and in Luke,
purport to show him rising up into the air,
disappearing into the heavens.
It's almost like he was launched into the sky.
So where is he now?
Is he still ascending?
Just how long does it take to get to heaven?
And where IS heaven, exactly?

How does a modern Christian
speak of the present location of our risen Lord?
And what does it mean for the church
that Jesus is no longer with us,
at least not in bodily form?
How can we say that Jesus is present,
in the Eucharist,
or possibly in the face of the stranger,
while at the same time we insist
that he is seated at the right hand of God?
And why do we celebrate his departure,
when we're going to turn around six months from now,
during Advent,
and long for his return?
It's all very confusing, isn't it?

Yes it is.
And rather than attempting to explain away
this admittedly confusing situation,
maybe we should just live in the confusion.

Maybe it's better just to ask ourselves
 "What does faithfulness look like
 when we *don't know* exactly where Christ is,
 or exactly what Christ's plans are for us?"
 Can we be sort of dog-like,
 acknowledging that we may not know where Christ is,
 but we confidently await his return, nonetheless?

You know, the disciples were confused too.
 But let's look at what Christ tells them to do
 in the midst of their confusion.
 "Do not leave," he tells them.
 "Stay. Wait for the promise."

This is interesting,
 because more often we recall Christ's commands to us
 to get up and go.
 Get out there and be at work in the world.
 Our lessons today serve as an important reminder
 that sometimes
 the most faithful response to our Lord
 is not to *go*,
 but to *stay*.
 And don't we all know people
 who have faithfully stayed and done their duty,
 even when going might have been so much easier?
 Too many people think that faith
 requires us to be absolutely clear
 about God's activity.
 Sometimes we're fearful to admit
 that we have no idea what God is up to.
 We're confused, and we don't understand.
 It's helpful to remember
 that sometimes clarity comes
 only as a result of our decision to stay and wait.

Actually, what Jesus promises
 on the other side of the staying and the waiting
 is not clarity.
 What he promises us is power.

Power is coming, Jesus tells the church.
Maybe not power as it is defined by the secular world.
What's coming to us is Holy Spirit power.

Holy Spirit power is what allows us
to act as Christ's disciples in the world.
It's what gives us the courage to challenge the forces of evil.

Holy Spirit power is what gave those first disciples
the wisdom and courage to start to spread the Gospel
across the face of the world.

Holy Spirit power is what gave the early church
the ability to withstand persecution and martyrdom,
even in the face of imperial oppression.

Holy Spirit power is what drew forth from the spirits of countless
generations of humans
the wish to serve others,
the willingness to sacrifice,
the desire to create beautiful things
all for the glory of God.

Holy Spirit power is what emboldened Dr. Martin Luther King
and others in the Civil Rights Movement
to stand strong in the face of fire hoses and police dogs and bigots.

Holy Spirit power is what is given
to each and every one of us
when at last we take up our vocation
to be witnesses to what God is doing in the world,
even if we can't proclaim with any certainty
just where in the world God is located.

So today, let me invite you
to spend some time considering
those places and situations in your life
from which you've been tempted to flee.
Think about the people you'd like to walk away from.
Think about the areas where you are frustrated

because you don't understand what's happening,
you don't see God at work,
you don't know what you're called to do or say,
and it all seems generally pointless to you.

Maybe this is the time for you to ponder Christ's words to his disciples
when they, too, were heartsick and uncertain,
and ready to go anywhere other than where they found themselves.

"Wait," Christ says.

"It is not for you to know the times or periods
that the Father has set.

But you will receive power
when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."

And so we wait.

Day after day, like faithful dogs,
we show up,

ready to greet our master upon his return,
certain in the knowledge

that while we may not know exactly where he is,
we know what he expects of us.

And God will give us the power to do
what we need to do,

God will give us the words to say
what we need to say.

And as we wait,

God will give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation,
as we come to know our Lord.

And thus with the eyes of our hearts enlightened,
we will know what the hope is

to which each of us has been called,

and we will experience the immeasurable greatness of God's power
for us who believe.

Amen.