17 years ago this June, I gave birth to my daughter, Kali. I had planned the birth carefully and read every book, magazine article, and pamphlet I could get my hands on. It was to be drug free, accompanied by a recording of the most beautiful music I could find, and I was going to breathe her into the world using Lamaze techniques. For many women, this plan works wonderfully. But, my baby was still kicking me from the inside 2 weeks after her due date. Someone suggested that swimming can sometimes bring on labor and I was desperate. So, one evening, after dinner when the weather had cooled off, a friend and I went to the wave pool which was a block away from our house.

Water is a great way to defy gravity. I might have looked and felt enormous, but in the water, I felt light and free for the first time in months. I was happily treading water when the first contraction hit….just as they turned on the waves. I quickly discovered that it is not possible to kick your feet and tread water while having a contraction. In addition, when the waves are going in a wave pool, they push away from the side of the pool and into deeper water. I hadn’t considered any of this. I had waves coming at me from inside and out, and was quickly in over my head!

I was very round, but surprisingly not very buoyant and immediately started sinking. I could hear people yelling “The pregnant lady, she’s going down”. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the lifeguard and within seconds I could feel his arms around me pulling me toward the ladder as the waves stopped. They’d had to turn off the waves for me. I could feel all the faces turned toward mine, which was rapidly turning red. The teenage lifeguard sat me down on a deck chair and sternly suggested that it might not have been a good idea to come to the pool at that particular point in my pregnancy (and he was right).

Labor was fast, no time for music, no time for drugs which I had by then decided I did want, badly, and no time to breathe. At one point, I was pushing as hard as I could, and I noticed the nurse laughing. “What are you doing?” she asked….I could not think of a remark sarcastic enough to express myself at that moment, although many options came to mind. Then she instructed, “You’re pushing without having contraction; you need to rest between them and just push when you actually have a contraction or you’re going to exhaust yourself.”

“But, I thought it would go much faster if I just kept pushing”

“It won’t” she said.

“Ohhh” I said. An hour later I was lifting my daughter into my own mother’s arms, as she and my stepfather had responded to the swimming pool story by catching the next train from Indpls to Chicago.

For those of you who may not be able to relate to this metaphor, let’s see: It would be like cheering for your team to score, when they actually don’t yet have the ball. Or, trying to make good time down the road with the car in 1st gear. Or for you students preparing for finals, it would be like trying to pass an exam without having the benefit of taking the class. Or planting
your garden in March and going out each day expecting to see tomatoes growing. Or making an important life decision without offering it to God in prayer and to people who love you in conversation. Or like an artist trying to force the paint onto the canvas before the image has reached her fingertips, or a writer insisting that the story stay with his outline, instead of trusting the twists and turns that begin unfolding as he writes, or the musician scattering notes onto the page instead of letting the music flow from ear to page and echo back again.

Jesus tells his disciples: “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

There is a time to push, to cheer, to move into high gear, to plant the seeds, to create, to bring into concrete form that which has been only dreamed about. We are not the ones who initiate that time, who create that time, or who fulfill that time. Our efforts alone mean only exhaustion, futility. It is only when our efforts are united with something beyond us…the collective energy of other people, the infusion of the Holy Spirit, the rhythm of cycles and seasons in the depth of time, that amazing things happen.

“But stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” Jesus’ final instructions to his disciples in this passage are a caution about timing, a reassurance that they do not have to get immediately to the job that he has called them to. “Wait until you feel the power, you feel the call, you have been clothed with power from on high”. Jesus is reminding us that we are not doing his work under our own power, our own steam, our own efforts; but out of his blessing and through the power of and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Where in your life are you pushing without pausing, forcing without feeling, running without resting, giving without being re-supplied, or planting when the ground and the conditions just aren’t ready yet? Where in your life are you trying too hard to do it yourself?

As I worked on this sermon, I found myself remembering high school gymnastics practice. I haven’t been able to touch my toes in 25 years, but back then, it was like flying, jumping on this huge trampoline hooked up to a safety harness to keep us from falling off…it taught us to use gravity instead of fight it, to get momentum going so that when gravity pulled you back that energy could then be focused to also propel you forward. Flip flops and back aerials are possible because you are working with gravity to rebound, to give in and push away back and forth, until you break away from it for just a moment, instead of being held down by it. Now, I was never especially good at this, never light on my feet like some of the others; but there were moments when I felt it, when my muscles suddenly required less effort because I finally got the timing, the rhythm right...then, it felt like flying.

Bob, do you remember that feeling when you were on the basketball court jumping up for a two pointer? Virginia, Donna, Pat, do you know that feeling, when you are singing and suddenly you and the music are ONE? Joyce, you know that feeling when your fingers, your heart, your spirit, your practicing, and your instrument are all working together and the music is carrying you even as you carry it? Roberta, you know how it is when your thoughts coalesce into words and the words into metaphors, images, sensations and suddenly, a poem is born? How many of you know that feeling when the project you’ve been working on finally all comes together and
suddenly it’s not laborious, it is fun. Or, when a teenager opens up to you, and just for a moment the words flow uncensored, unguarded? OR when you realize that the urge to have a drink or a drug or another doughnut, or to buy something you don’t really need, or to say something you don’t really mean…is gone, has passed, and you feel a deep satisfaction… I think that is what this scripture is about.

Where in your life are you working against gravity and wearing yourself out? On the other hand, when is the last time you felt like you were in the flow, in the moment, and not only were you not over-tired, but you even felt energized? Take a moment and remember it now…take a moment and breathe, relax. There is nothing for you to do right now, at this moment, but be, but be open to the Spirit which has been looking for you, seeking you, chasing you and waiting for you to stop for a moment, and prepare to be clothed in power, in light, in love, and in a Presence that is and has been yearning to join with you, to help you achieve the call that is upon you, the challenges that are before you, and the life that is within you.

Ascension Sunday is not just about Jesus’ rising to be with God, but about Jesus’ reminder that we too are to rise to be with God. In the scripture, the Spirit comes both to Jesus’ followers to clothe them in power and the Spirit comes to help Jesus transition, to ascend, from this life to eternity. Ascension may literally mean “to go or move upward, to arise” but, God is not literally up in the sky; heaven is not literally above us, beyond the clouds and somewhere over the rainbow; the kingdom of God is within.

Jesus has left the disciples, but then we read that “they were joyful and praising God”; why? It appears that their spirits too ascended, transcended the gravity of their situation, the oppression and persecution and despair that had engulfed them just a short time before; instead of weeping, they were worshipping, instead of panicking they were praising, and instead of absence, they were filled with ascension.

The hour that my mother finally died, we all felt not only grief, but also relief; she was out of pain and the cancer that had wasted her body no longer had any power over her; she was free. Where did she go? Did she go up? Did she ascend like water evaporating back into the atmosphere, to be collected into a cloud, to descend again as water for the seeds in the garden? Where did she go after she moved from our embraces into the embraces of her mother and grandmother invisible to our eyes, but who had been, she told us, with her, helping her during those final difficult weeks?

Several of you confided to me during our Lenten gatherings, that you too felt not only pain and sorrow, but also a lightening, a releasing when someone you loved died. Perhaps as they ascend, sometimes, we can feel it too? Like the disciples discovered after Jesus’ ascension, when someone we love goes to be with God, they do not really leave us; in fact, in some ways, they become even more deeply a part of us. And I don’t think it is necessarily their dying that accomplishes this; but their lives and their love.

The true ascension of Jesus was not being literally levitated off the ground and into the sky; the true ascension of Jesus, is when he transcended the limitations of his culture and valued those who were not valued by society; the true ascension of Jesus began when he lifted up the widows
and the lepers, the unclean and the outcasts. The true ascension of Jesus began when he was born into poverty and remained faithful to his roots there, proclaiming that “blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” and instructing the wealthy and status-filled that they could learn a thing or two from a poor widow who put her last penny into the plate. The true ascension of Jesus began as he taught compassion instead of judgment, inclusion instead of separation, sharing instead of possessing, and serving one another instead of arguing over whose prayers and burnt offerings and theologies and interpretations were better, and that loving our enemies and helping each other are the most important ways to serve and worship God.

We come closest to understanding the ascension of Jesus any time we lift someone else up, extend a hand to help someone who has fallen, lift the stones off of someone who is breaking under the heaviness of their life situation, play and laugh and love until our spirits are flying like a kid on a trampoline, or a child in one of those inflatable moon walks. May the Spirit clothe you in power, so that you too might defy the gravity of this human condition, the struggles and the setbacks, the exhaustion and the worrying…and with the help of God and each another, may you know the joy of truly being free. Amen.

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