



Feast of the Ascension, Easter Week 7

With Great Joy

*Then he led them out as far as Bethany,
raised his hands and blessed them.
As he blessed them, he parted from them
and was taken up to heaven.
They did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem
with great joy. - Luke 24:50-52*

It has been 40 days now since Easter morning and the discovery that Jesus' tomb was empty. It's been 40 days since Jesus' friends first found the stone rolled away and were filled with horror: *Where was his body?* Forty days since they tried to talk with one another about what they'd seen, but then refused to believe each other's stories. Forty days since they huddled with anxiety in a room in Jerusalem afraid of arrest, missing Jesus tremendously.

And now today, we hear of them out in the open, letting go of Jesus, not knowing when they will see him again. And we hear of them eagerly returning to Jerusalem —the city where Jesus was killed — *with great joy. What has happened?!*

Easter has happened. Not a single moment, but a 40-day journey.

Throughout the bible, 40 is a very special number. In the story of Noah and the ark, rain fell upon the earth for 40 days and 40 nights. In the story of the exodus from Egypt, God led the Israelites across the desert for 40 years. When the Babylonians burned down the first temple in Jerusalem, they forced the people into exile from their homeland for 40 years. Forty, in the Bible, is the amount of time it takes for a transformation to take place. Behavioral science confirms this. So many of us begin each new year making resolutions that we are going to change our bad habits and adopt good ones. But if we want a resolution to stick, we need to do it for 40 days in a row before it is likely to remain part of our daily life. Real change doesn't happen in a single moment; it's a journey.

And a journey is what the friends of Jesus have been on. Over the course of 40 days, they've had admittedly mysterious, yet frequently repeated experiences of Jesus risen in their midst. They've come to understand that he *is* alive, though in a whole new way, and that he *is* still with them, though he does not look like the Jesus they knew before. They've come to trust that he will *continue* to be with them, even if they won't be able to see him with their eyes anymore. And they've come to trust *each other*, bound forever by this common experience of having walked through not only Jesus' death, but these



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life-changing days of resurrection with each other. They are no longer afraid, no longer separated, no longer hiding. They have rediscovered joy.

During the past 40 days, you've been tracing this journey with Jesus' friends. What has changed for you? When you think back on the reflections of the past seven weeks, can you remember one that has stuck with you? Perhaps an insight that remains with you and has made you consider the work you are doing in a slightly different light? Have you been able to spot Jesus in the "hello" of someone you had given up on? Or perhaps in a renewed confidence that you are where you are supposed to be and doing what you are supposed to do? Maybe you've encountered the Risen Christ in a gesture of compassion. In a change that you never thought you'd get to see in your lifetime. In a sense of connection to a loved one lost. Do you feel anything shifting inside of you? A new seed of hope sprouting within you? A smile emerging after the tears? Any and all of these — small and subtle as they might be — are signs of someone who's been on an Easter journey.

And that journey isn't over yet. Today, let's draw alongside Jesus' friends in reflecting on where we have been these last 40 days, but also in joyful anticipation knowing God's not done with us. Easter is only the beginning of all that God has planned for those who've walked together through the valley of death to new life.