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## Winning Isn't Everything

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Sometimes words of wisdom can come from places we might not expect, which can make them all the more appreciated or valuable when you recognize it. One of those places for me is the long running BBC TV show Doctor Who. By now most of you know I grew up watching this show about a time traveling alien who is a complex character and flawed hero, who over the years has learned to recognize his mistakes and deals with the grief and consequences of those mistakes.

In one episode of Doctor Who, the Doctor and his companion killed an alien they thought was terrorizing a village on long ago earth, only to discover the creature had been abandoned by its kind, was blind, terribly frightened and terribly alone. In that heartbreaking moment, the Doctor said, "Sometimes winning is no fun at all."

What the fictional character's words indicate is when winning is understood to be when the biggest, strongest, cleverest, or most powerful person or group destroys the weaker person or group, there is a cost, the same cost we honor every Memorial Day when we remember the men and women who died serving the military in times of war, and that cost is always loss and grief. And that can take the wind out of the sails of victory, especially if we understand victory the same way the author of Luke's Gospel and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles understands victory and winning.

Today we find ourselves in an interesting place in the Church Calendar. We are still in the season of Easter, a time of celebrating Jesus' resurrection, and how God defeated death itself. It is also the Sunday after Ascension Day, which we heard about in our first reading in Acts of the Apostles, when Jesus was lifted up, was exalted by God and returned to God in the presence of the Apostles, which is another name for those disciples, those friends and followers of Jesus. Today we are in that in-between place; Jesus has been exalted, raised by God from the dead and raised by God to be with God and his followers are left to seemingly wonder where to turn their eyes and their attention. If this is what winning looks like, it doesn't seem to look like what they thought it would be, and might make them and us wonder what is next.

While it is tempting to jump right away to the excitement and celebration of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit brought a fire that burned brighter than all the disciples' fear, the Church in its wisdom gives us this time in between Jesus' ascension and the Holy Spirit's arrival to remind us God's understanding of winning is not what we might want it to be.

Scholars like to remind us that the author of Luke's writings, which is believed to be both the Gospel According to Luke and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, is that Jesus' followers might have recognized him as the Messiah, but they failed to understand what purpose the Messiah was to serve and what that meant for those who follow Christ.

That misunderstanding is seen throughout all the Gospels, with Jesus' disciples arguing over places of prestige when Jesus succeeds in his mission, which they assumed and believed as generations before them had believed that Jesus was going to fulfill the political and military prophecy that would bring about the restoration of Israel as it was under King David: the mighty and powerful winner that other countries feared and respected. The people of Jesus' time longed for the nostalgia of an era when they were the winners, because everyone wants to be a winner, right?

We can see that desire clearly in the question the disciples asked Jesus in our reading from Acts this morning. After Jesus' death. After his resurrection. After the 40 days when he appeared to them and opened their minds to the scriptures, they still wanted only what they wanted. The war to end all wars, the war that would finally destroy the power of Rome once and for all, and put Israel on top again. And they wanted to know if this was finally the time all of that was going to come about.

Did you notice how Jesus responded to their question? By telling them it is not their place to know when God is going to act. And, by promising them power. But not necessarily the power they yearned for. Not the power of the past that would win wars. The power of the Holy Spirit, which, Jesus said wasn't for fighting wars, it is to empower their new vocation as witnesses whose purpose isn't that of warrior or ruler, but teller of the story of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Jesus' Ascension marks an important transition for the disciples, one that points them in the direction they may not have been ready for. Which might explain the angels. Pay attention when angels show up in the Scriptures, because angels often show up when God is up to something new, and God knows it can be hard for people to change, to get used to a new idea or a new way, and will send angels to help in these times. Remember we saw angels at Jesus' birth. We saw angels at Jesus' resurrection. Now there are angels present again, with a message telling the disciples to turn their attention from gazing after that which is no longer in their midst to the direction they must now go. What had been a time of revelation, of miracles, and learning, is now a time to mature, to use what they have learned, and become what God is calling them to be.

So they went back to a place they all knew, all together, their new community that included women who had followed Jesus, where they waited for what was to come next with prayer. Remember, prayer isn't just talking to God, it is listening, it is a way of engaging with God, which is another thing Jesus showed his followers. So they followed in his ways, perhaps remembering that long, beautiful prayer from John's Gospel we also heard this morning where Jesus prayed for his disciples.

Today, on this unique day in the Church Year, it might be a good day to reflect on the question of the disciples and the question of the angels and ask ourselves what it is we are gazing at and longing for. Are we also guilty of longing for the good ol' days when we remember ourselves as being younger, stronger, bigger in number and richer in dollars? Can we shift our gaze, like the disciples, from the world that was to the world that is and follow those who follow Jesus by devoting ourselves to prayer as a way to prepare to live as Christ's heart and hands and feet in the world? Can we shift from thinking of success as big numbers to finding ways to meet people where they are: people who have been hurt by the church, who don't know the church, who have forgotten or haven't been told of the tremendous love of God in Jesus and show them that God hasn't forgotten them?

It might sound like intimidating work. Which is why I think it is important to remember the prayer parts of our readings today, and that Jesus promises to be with us, in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit who brings power, not the kind of power that hurts or belittles or destroys, but the power that inspires and shows us how to make every day a little more like God's Kingdom here on earth, for that is what winning and victory is to God; when the world is less like the nightmare we make for ourselves, where greed and conquering is everything, to the dream God has for us where we are with God in all things.

Such a dream may not happen all at once, but slowly can break through, and spread, and grow, that is the work God calls us, calls you and me to do together.