

In the summer of 2010, I served as the pastor of Venice United Church of Christ in Venice, Florida, while their pastor took a sabbatical.

Shortly after I began my ministry with this congregation, a member of the church passed away.

This gentleman was elderly and in ill health, so his death wasn't completely unexpected.

Soon after he passed, I met with his wife to discuss the memorial service.

During our conversation, she simply shook her head and, with tears in her eyes, she said, "No. Not yet."

No, not yet? What does that mean?

When someone dies, we plan a memorial service, that's how us good pastors are trained.

And I was quite the newbie, so I didn't know what to make of this "No, not yet."

What I later came to understand, after much conversation, was that she wasn't ready to say goodbye.

She wasn't ready to accept that her husband wasn't with us anymore.

She said that once we had the service, that would make it real, and she wasn't ready to make it real.

At the end of our meeting, I said,

“Okay. We'll wait as long as you need.

You let me know when you're ready to start planning something, how does that sound?”

She agreed.

We ended up having his memorial service about 6 weeks later.

I thought a lot about this woman recently while reading Joan Didion's book, The Year of Magical Thinking.

She won a National Book Award for her memoir about the year after her husband died.

He unexpectedly passed away in front of her, at their dinner table in their apartment in New York City.

In the throws of magical thinking,

which is a way of viewing the world where a immediate and stunning loss overwhelmed her rational side, some part of her literally refused to believe her husband had died.

In the memoir, she writes, *“I could not give away the rest of his shoes.*

*I stood there for a moment, then realized why: he would need shoes if he was to return.*

*The recognition of this thought by no means eradicated the thought.*

*I have still not tried to determine (say, by giving away the shoes) if the thought has lost its power.”*

The theme of her husband’s shoes received a lot of attention after her book was published.

In an interview, Joan notes, *“I couldn’t give away my husband’s shoes.*

*I could give away other things, but the shoes—I don’t know what it was about the shoes, but a lot of people have mentioned to me that shoes took on more meaning than we generally think they do...*

*their attachment to the ground, I don’t know—but that did have a real resonance for me.”*

It can be nearly impossible for us to accept that someone is physically gone.

That hole in your heart that they leave, it never goes away.

It changes, though.

It starts out as raw grief and pain, like an open wound.

And over the years, the hole changes, it gets covered by time and memories of your loved one.

But the hole never goes away, it just becomes a patch in the tapestry of who you are, and the influence that person had on you never dissipates.

They've forever changed you, their influence has left an indelible mark upon you, as evidenced by that hole that you carry around with you.

The disciples, they were grieving.

They were yearning.

I imagine they were wailing and holding each other and inconsolably crying after Jesus died.

We see pictures of Jesus' crucifixion and all the people at the foot of the cross gazing up longingly at him,

maybe with despair or surprise on their faces.

But those pictures are the visual depictions of a story made by artists whose perceptions are clouded by thousands of years of interpretation and sanitization.

I bet that accurate depictions of Jesus' disciples during and after his crucifixion would make us really uncomfortable because of their raw emotion.

Maybe, like my friend in Florida, or like Joan Didion, maybe they needed time to grieve his death, to come to terms with it.

Maybe they weren't ready to accept that he was literally gone.

Maybe all those stories of Jesus being with them on the seashore and on the road to Emmaus and in the garden, all those times he appeared to them after his crucifixion and resurrection, maybe those were memories they were holding on to, to keep him alive.

Maybe those were moments they had in which they could feel his presence with them so strongly that it's like he was there.

Maybe it took them 40 days finally be ready to say goodbye, as evidenced by the ascension story we heard this morning.

Now, we know that in the Bible, the number 40 is often shorthand for, a long time passed.

Whether it's Noah and his family in the boat for 40 days, or Jacob and Esau being 40 years old when they marry their wives, or Moses and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

Whether days or years, the number 40 means that it took a long time for something to happen.

So, Jesus ascending to heaven 40 days after Easter means that it took a while for his disciples to be ready to say goodbye to him.

That's how long it took for them to come to terms with his death and the fact that he was no longer with them in body.

But the power of the Ascension story is that it reminds us that he has never left us in spirit.

Jesus is with us all the time.

He cannot be contained to one place or time or space.

No building, no book, no people, no country, can limit Jesus, and the extent of his influence on our world.

The disciples wanted to keep Jesus in Jerusalem.

But Paul said no, Jesus belongs beyond Jerusalem.

We don't have ownership over him and his message, he can't stay in the temple and only be accessible to circumcised Jews, he's for Jew and Gentiles.

And Paul got in fights with the disciples about this.

So, Paul takes Jesus' message to a bigger space, to Rome.

Then Jesus stays in Rome for a while and the Roman Catholic Church forms and they say, we've got a hold on Jesus.

You've got to be a baptized Catholic in order to have access to him through the Eucharist.

But we've forgotten what catholic, with a small c, means, universal, all-embracing.

Jesus isn't just for us, the Muslims think he's a prophet, the Jews think he was a wise teacher.

Non-Christians can still appreciate his teachings and allow their lives to be changed by him, we don't have a monopoly on Jesus.

If something is true for us, forgiveness, unconditional love, it has to be true everywhere, for everyone, regardless of their ethnicity, religious identity, or whether or not they've been baptized.

And we, as Christians, need to be witnesses to this truth.

We know that Jesus' teachings, his message, his influence on this world through his relations with the downtrodden and the powerless and the lowly, we know that they span the existence of time, but we need to be witnesses to this truth in our time.

Just like the grieving widow's husband would never leave her, and Joan Didion's husband, John Dunne, will never leave her.

They will be witnesses to their spouses' lives for as long as they live.

And likewise, Jesus will never leave us, because he lives on in what we say and what we do and in how we gather together.

But, Jesus is a little different from anyone else who has died, and in his case, there are not only witnesses to his message, but there are speculators as well.

You know who I'm talking about.

*"Speculators write books of calculations, hold seminars that attract thousands, rake in untold piles of money, while prognosticating a certain time for Jesus' return.*

*Witnesses, on the other hand, just witness to the truth of the Gospel: the truth of justice for the whole world, the love of enemies, and the care for the marginalized and outcast."* (Holbert, John. "Speculators or Witnesses? Reflections on Ascension Sunday." [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com).)



The world needs far fewer speculators and far more witnesses.

The Ascension challenges us to be those witnesses, to bring heaven to earth, to remember that Jesus' spirit didn't leave his disciples and it hasn't left us.

Every week, we say, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven."

We don't need to worry about heaven.

We need to make sure God's will is being done on Earth by being witnesses to Jesus' Gospel message of truth and compassion and forgiveness and empathy and patience and kindness and love.

We need to live from a higher perspective, to transcend our own self-interest, to embrace the well being of the whole earth, and to share this message with strangers, enemies, friends, family and all of creation.

Amen.