

From My Time to Yours: Passing the Baton
(Acts 1:1-11 and Luke 24:44-53)

Rannulph Junah was the best golfer Savannah, Georgia had ever seen. That is until he went off to fight in World War I. He was decorated a hero by the Army but the emotional scars of battle were deep. When he finally returned home to Savannah he got off the train and just faded into the crowd unnoticed. Rannulph Junah had "lost his swing."

Many years later, in an effort to rescue its sagging economy, the City of Savannah decided to host a high stakes golf match featuring the two top golfers in the country. In order to create enthusiasm for the event locally, the city fathers coaxed Junah out of his self-imposed exile to represent Savannah.

Now since returning from the war Junah spent most of his time in a whiskey bottle. It had been years since he had picked up a golf club. Late one cold and misty evening, after having had too much to drink, Junah found his clubs. Using a kerosene lantern for light he went outside and began to hit balls into the dark night air.

And then, out of the shadows, a figure appeared to Junah. At first he thought it was an apparition induced by the whiskey. But it was not an apparition. Bagger Vance appeared from out of nowhere and stepped into Junah's life to help him find his swing – and himself – once again. And so a relationship was forged between Junah – the golfer and Bagger Vance – the mystical caddy who came from out of the shadows of nowhere.

In the early round of the tournament Junah struggled to find his swing. With calming words of wisdom that mixed the game of golf with living life Bagger helped Junah to come back. And then, with the match tied as they played the last hole, Bagger told Junah that it was time for him to leave. "I need you," Junah said, knowing that the most difficult shots were yet to come. "No you don't," said Bagger.

Then Bagger handed over Junah's clubs to a young boy in the crowd and instructed him to carry on. The boy felt inadequate to the task, but Bagger assured him that he could do the job. With his mission completed Bagger Vance simply walked off the last green and vanished into the setting sun. Please pray with me.

And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, Redeemer God, the one who comes to us in Christ Jesus. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and your word as it is proclaimed in this place. Help us we pray to understand how your holy word intersects our lives today in many different ways. Bless our hearing and understanding of your message this morning. Amen.

Just like that, Jesus is gone. He reappears long enough to say goodbye. Like a wraith, like a dream, he departs

from the disciples, leaving behind no children, no estate, no writings, no trace of himself except this feeling that his presence was real. Just like Bagger Vance vanished without a trace, leaving only the feeling that he was real.

For most Christians, the Ascension is a difficult concept to explain within the context of our physical world. But it's in most of our creeds and when we recite those creeds we say with great conviction: "he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father." While we might puzzle over the physics of how it happened, we have little trouble, it seems, grasping it emotionally within the context of our religious beliefs.

What meaning does the Ascension hold for our lives today? To say the words of the Apostles' Creed without coming to grips with what those words actually mean for us today is hollow.

Some of you are aware that our previous bishop here in Northern Illinois, Rev. Joe Sprague, was quite controversial. Joe believes that traditional religion today is based on creeds that are outdated and archaic. While I don't always agree with Joe's theology, I do agree that if we fail to understand what those creeds mean for our lives today then we ourselves have allowed them to become archaic and outdated. If the words bear no relationship to our lives here in the twenty-first century then they are archaic and outdated. Perhaps that's what Joe was getting at in his book, "Confessions of a Dissenter."

So as we gather this morning to acknowledge and celebrate the Ascension let's spend some time talking about what it means for us today.

The Ascension creates within us

a mixture of feelings – a tension between feelings of joy and grief, and a tension between feelings of doubt and certainty.

The disciples felt great joy on the occasion of the Ascension because they witnessed God make good on the promise to glorify Jesus Christ as he was "taken up into heaven." They would soon understand that they too would share in that glory.

But there was also a feeling of grief as that which once had a physical presence seemed to be lost to the world. We know all too well that tension between joy and grief in our lives today as loved ones are suddenly taken from us in death. We are in awe of the peace that comes with death but feel a deep sense of loss as we face physical separation. It's an amazing thing and a dreadful thing at the same time. Even though we know that they are in "a better place," we can't follow them there just now. In the midst of our life which continues, we have a difficult time imagining that we will ever follow them to that "better place."

The Legend of Bagger Vance illustrates the tension between joy and grief at the Ascension. For Junah there was joy in the hope of a come-back victory. But at the same time there was a feeling of grief, even fear, in finishing out the last hole without Bagger, the one that redeemed him by helping him find his swing – as well as himself. Bagger's time had become Junah's time.

The disciples also felt that tension between doubt and certainty. Christ told them before ascending that they were to remain in Jerusalem "until you have been clothed with power from on high." This is a reference to Pentecost, that time when God will send the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and

the newly formed faith community of believers in Jerusalem.

There were feelings of doubt because the disciples were concerned that they would not be able to carry on after Jesus was no longer by their side. And at the same time, they must have felt an air of certainty in Jesus' promise to empower them with the Holy Spirit at the soon-to-come celebration of Pentecost. In the face of doubt there was a sense of certainty.

This tension between doubt and certainty around the Ascension is also illustrated in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. As Bagger prepares to depart, he hands Junah's clubs to the young man in the gallery and tells him to take over, to carry on. The young man is filled with a sense of doubt. How can a young boy take on such an awesome responsibility after the more worthy Bagger is gone?

Bagger's words to "carry on," empower the youngster as he steps out on to the golf course with Junah's clubs. Bagger's time is now passing to the young boy who will stand by Junah in the final and most difficult strokes of the tournament.

The ascension marks that moment when we pass from Jesus' time into our own time; that moment when we are empowered to carry on the work of Christ in the world. Jesus passes the baton to the disciples and tells them to carry on – and also promises to empower them for the task at hand.

Bagger Vance's departure marks that moment when Junah and the young boy pass from Bagger's time into their own time; that moment when they are empowered to carry on Bagger's work. Bagger passes the baton to Junah and the young boy.

The Ascension has meaning for our lives today when we understand that it is Jesus' way of reminding us that his mission to the world is complete but the work he began is not complete. The Ascension is the ceremonial passing of the baton of responsibility for carrying on God's work in the world. Jesus' time has become our time, our time to carry on what he began two thousand years ago.

When I was in high school I wasn't much for track and field events – particularly the old baton relay. That race is a team effort run by four people who each run a leg of the course carrying the baton. When one runner completes a leg of the race he passes the baton to the next runner who is waiting. The team that gets the baton to the finish line first wins.

But there are at least two important elements to passing the baton from one runner to the next: timing and touch. Timing is important because the runner who is going to receive the baton must match the speed of the runner who is going to pass the baton. Touch is important because the runner receiving the baton must feel it securely planted in her hand to avoid dropping it.

Being among the slower runners, I usually had trouble passing the baton to the guy on the next leg of the relay. Being much faster than me, it seemed like he was always getting too far ahead, making it difficult to time the passing of the baton.

Sometimes, we tend to get ahead of God. We take off on our own without consulting God, without those empowering words to "carry on." The gospel lesson this morning – and the message in *The Legend of Bagger Vance* – should remind us that we need to patiently seek God's direction through

the process of discernment, to pray for God's empowerment before setting out on our own course.

One thing we can count on as Jesus' time passes into our time is that we will be empowered by God. But timing is important. The meaning of the Ascension for our lives today is to remind us that Jesus' work in the world is not complete and that we are called to receive the baton that continues his ministry.

The Ascension is also a reminder to us that the timing of the passing of Jesus' time into our time is critical. We must take care to not get ahead of God. As we accept the baton of Christian ministry we must match our selves to God's plan for our lives – and for the world. We need to be in sync with God's plan for our lives. Patience and prayer lead to discernment and discernment guides us in the direction of God's plan for our ministry in the world.

In the Ascension, God's time becomes our time. The Ascension is the passing of the baton of ministry and empowerment from Jesus to each one of us. We are called to pace our selves with Christ, to align ourselves with God's plan. Timing is the essence of the Ascension so that we take care to not drop the baton offered by Jesus.