

May 18, Ascension (Luke 24:44-53)

Luke places Jesus' final blessing and departure in Bethany—the root of which means “house” or “home.”

by [Victoria Lynn Garvey](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue

My mother was a force. She was a dancer, an artist, an amateur writer and editor, one of those comedians who didn't always realize how funny she could be. She was also an enormously inept cook and, ironically, an immensely popular and exuberant hostess. And, although I admit some bias here, she was also a terrific and creative mother.

Her family of origin was a long-lived bunch—her father died at the age of 100 and her mother at 104. Since she shared their robust genes, it was a shock when she had a sudden and catastrophic stroke at age 92. She'd been raking about 80 bags of leaves from her lawn the week before! The stroke limited her physically, as such things do, but the most painful part, for her and for us, was that she lost that spark and oomph, that joie de vivre that had so characterized her every moment.

Several weeks before her death, she and I had a long conversation. She had been telling me for about a year that her parents—long deceased by then—had been visiting. On this occasion, she told me that they'd dropped by that morning to say that they would return soon to take her home. She was worried that they might not be able to find her and asked if I would steer them to her new residence. I assured her that I would, but when I asked her which home they meant, she was vague. She paused and looked into the distance.

Then she beamed; I hadn't seen her this animated in months. There was, for the briefest of moments, that old spark reignited. She said, “It's so beautiful there and . . . everybody's there. Everybody, Vic.” And she lapsed into silence with a broad smile and that look of utter amazement. We sat then, basking in that tender time.

Because it would be several weeks before her actual death—on the Feast of the Epiphany, no less—that conversation does not constitute a bona fide deathbed speech, though it certainly felt that way at the time. Nor does Jesus’ final speech in Luke’s Gospel, since it comes after his death and resurrection and at the moment of his ascension. Yet this is his farewell speech—in this particular Gospel, at least—and Luke, unlike John, gives us no hint that there is more left unrecorded.

No basking in tender time here for him or for them. According to Luke, it’s been quite a busy day for the newly resurrected one, as it has been for his disciples. There was, of course, the resurrection itself, certainly an event momentous enough for one day, despite the unbelief at the great, good news proclaimed by the women. Then the Emmaus pair, having had the encounter with the risen one on the way, do the second half of their round trip back to Jerusalem in time to meet him and other disciples, perhaps in that famous shut and sealed room.

What follows on that same day is its own kind of tender time, along with one final home-leaving and a particular kind of homecoming. After a meal of leftover broiled fish, the sort of feast one offers only to family or close friends, Jesus passes on his final words and entrusts his ministry to these fragile few.

Could it be an accident that Luke places this final blessing and departure in Bethany? Bethany: the very root of the name means “house” or “home.” Bethany: Jesus’ home base in the final weeks or months before his death. Bethany: the village where, according to the Fourth Gospel, his friends Mary and Martha live and where he raises their brother, Lazarus. It seems apropos that such a setting so redolent of other tender times at home should be the scene of his final leave-taking, of his own particular homecoming, of his transition and of theirs.

In Tennessee Williams’s *The Night of the Iguana*, one of the characters, Hannah Jelkes, teaches another character, erstwhile priest T. Lawrence Shannon, one of the characteristics of an authentic, faithful life. “We make a home for each other, my grandfather and I,” she tells him at one point.

Do you know what I mean by a home? I don’t mean a regular home. I mean I don’t mean what other people mean when they speak of a home, because I don’t regard a home as a . . . well, as a place, a building . . . a house . . . of wood, bricks, stone. I think of a home as being a thing that two people have between them in which each can . . . well,

nest—rest—live in, emotionally speaking.

Jesus, surely, and the disciples, eventually, would have understood..