



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**  
Presbyterian (USA)

## On Holding On and Letting Go

SCRIPTURE:  
Luke 24:44-53

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August 20, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**T**he Pixar film “Up” tells the story of Ellie and Carl Fredricksen. They meet as children, grow up together and marry. Ellie is adventurous and outgoing. Carl is reserved and quiet. They are the perfect complement for one another. Their beautiful love story opens the movie. They both get jobs in the South America pavilion at the local zoo. Carl sells balloons and Ellie tends to the birds there. They have a lifelong dream to see Paradise Falls in South America one day. Here is the story of Carl and Ellie. [movie clip shown]

After Ellie dies, Carl misses her greatly. He transfers his love for Ellie to the house they built together. He even takes to calling the house, “Ellie.” It’s understandable. Carl is doing everything he can to hold on to his beloved Ellie.

In today’s Bible reading, Luke is describing the last moments of Jesus Christ on the earth. Jesus is alive and has appeared to the disciples and in his last meeting with them, he helps them understand why he had to die so that all that was told of the Messiah in the Old Testament would come to pass. Then he leads them to Bethany—about 2.5 miles outside of Jerusalem—and after blessing them one last time, he is carried up to heaven.

Imagine with me the emotions running through them. They witness the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, their teacher and friend. Then three women from their group of disciples tell them something unbelievable after visiting the tomb that is now empty: That two angels told them Jesus had risen. Then two of them on the road to Emmaus come back and tell them they have seen Jesus. Then Jesus himself appears to the disciples, eats with them and explains to them why all this had to take place. Then he leads them outside of Jerusalem and after blessing them, Luke says he is carried up to heaven. Later

in Acts, Luke adds more details and says Jesus “was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

I can imagine the conversation. I imagine a number of them thought he was raised to life to stay with them. I mean, surely there would be thousands, millions, of converts once they saw that Jesus was alive. The Romans would be in awe. Maybe make him the new Caesar. But instead, he leads them out of the city and is carried up in the air and disappears on a cloud. “What on earth?” “Nope. Wrong. Not on earth anymore.” “Did you just see what I saw?” “Well, yes, I’m standing right here.” “He just lifted up in the air.” “I know.” “Then that cloud! Did you see that cloud swoop down? It’s like he rode the cloud away.” “Yep. Still right here next to you seeing the same thing you saw.” “Well, what do you make of this? I thought he was here to stay!” “You can’t have thought that. It’s Jesus. He never does anything we expect.” “But he just came back.” “I know but now we have to let him go.” “But he just got back.” “I guess we have to let him go.” “But he just got back!” “Let him go.”

We call this the ‘ascension of Jesus’ because he ascends. He rises up in the sky. The disciples desperately want to hold on but for the church to grow, they have to let Jesus go.

Being the only remaining single residence amid a neighborhood that has been taken over by high-rise condominiums, Carl decides to take Ellie to Paradise Falls by attaching thousands of helium balloons to the house. Unbeknownst to Carl, he picks up a passenger, a little boy named Russell, a Wilderness Explorer, who is trying to earn his “Assisting the Elderly” badge. Russell gets stuck on Mr. Fredricksen’s porch when the house unexpectedly takes flight and the two of them travel to South America.

When they get to Paradise Falls, they encounter Charles Muntz, a former film star and explorer who is desperately searching for a mystical 12-foot-tall

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bird. Muntz has trained his dogs—and equipped them with speaking devices—to hunt and kill the bird. The paranoid Muntz becomes convinced that Mr. Fredricksen and Russell are here to find and steal his discovery. They end up on Muntz’s dirigible where Muntz wants to shoot and kill the bird and this is the result. [movie clip shown]

Holding on and letting go. Several years ago I was speaking at a middle-school conference at Mo-Ranch, a conference center in Hunt, Texas. They have a high-ropes course where you climb 50 feet into the air, are attached to a safety cable, then complete a series of challenges stretched between poles. Between one set of poles, you walk across a bridge made up of cables. On another, you step from swinging platform to swinging platform. At the very end, you jump into mid air to catch a swing, then you take a zip line back down to the ground. From the ground, looking up at it, it looks hard. From the top, looking down, it is terrifying.

I was going to just watch and cheer on the 6th, 7th, and 8th graders and adults who were brave enough to try this but then one of the young people saw me and said, “Hey, look! It’s Rodger! He’s here to try it, too!” I was going to say, “I’m not going up there! Are you crazy? Only an idiot would voluntarily be up there!” But the Holy Spirit told me that would not be good since there were young people and adults up there so I was soon harnessed up and hooked on to the safety cable—50 feet in the air—thinking to myself, “Well, this could possibly be one of the dumbest things you’ve ever done, Nishioka.”

I made my way across each of the challenges following Janel, a petite, beautiful 7th-grade Latina who was going very slowly, which was just fine with me. It was clear she was scared. I was, too. The last challenge you must conquer before getting to the final pole and zip line is stepping on these swinging blocks while holding on to a single cable above your head. Well, Janel was so short, it was hard for her to hold on to the cable and the blocks kept swinging

beneath her feet. She had made it one-third of the way across and started crying. I kept encouraging her from the platform, telling her she was doing great and just take a breath. She was shaking.

Then one of the staff people on the ground told me to go out on the blocks to help Janel make her way across. I started to do that and slowly made my way to her. When I did, she let go of the cable above her and wrapped her arms around my neck holding me from behind. She couldn’t tell because she was crying but her forearms were pressing against my throat and she was cutting off my air. I tried to tell her to stop but I couldn’t talk and I remember thinking, “I can’t breathe. I am going to pass out.” And so, I am holding on with one hand to the cable above my head and with the other trying to pry Janel’s arms away from my throat and thinking, “Wow, little girl, you are remarkably strong.” I could feel the panic rising in me. Then the Holy Spirit spoke to me and said, “Let go.” And I remembered that both our harnesses were attached to the safety cable above us. And I let go. I dropped off the swinging blocks about a foot and a half and dangled there in the air and when I dropped, Janel let go of me and she dropped, too. And we’re both hanging there—startled. I looked at her and asked, “Are you okay?” and she smiled and said, “Yes. Are you?” And I smiled and said, “I am, too.” The people on the ground were cheering for us and then they lowered us both down. When we reached the ground, I hugged her and she smiled and I did, too.

There are times for holding on. There are times for letting go. Mr. Fredricksen let go of Ellie. In doing so, he was able to hold on to Russell. And this is what happened at Russell’s Wilderness Explorer badge ceremony. [third movie clip shown]

Holding on. Letting go. There are times to hold on. There are times to let go. The Gospel according to Pixar. The Gospel according to Luke. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.