

In 1984, Bruce Springsteen released his chart-topping album *Born in the USA*, which sold over 30 million copies, spent years on the charts, produced seven Billboard Top 10 singles, and became one of the best-selling albums of all time. It includes some of his most famous songs that even 40 years later still play on the radio, hits like *Glory Days*, *I'm on Fire* and *Dancing in the Dark*. But one track, the final one, stands apart. *My Hometown*, the closing song on the album, also charted and in some places even outperformed the others, growing in significance over time, which is unique because this song, if you know it, is different than all the other ones on his album. It's more somber tone and has a slower beat. The song moves from childhood memories of a small town toward the slow recognition of decline, economic loss, empty storefronts, factories closing, people leaving what they once loved, and the artist grieving that loss.

At its heart, it's a song about realizing that the place you love has changed, and what it means to love a home that you can no longer fully return to. It gives voice to the saying "You can't go home again", that aching awareness that what once was is no longer, and even we are not who we once were.

When I lived in New Hampshire, we were having just a regular day and a family knocked on our front door. They said, "This is our childhood home from 50 years ago." They were six siblings and they said, "Do you mind if we have a tour?"

"Yeah, sure. Of course. Come in."

And at the front door they said, "Oh my gosh, it hasn't changed a bit."

But room by room they realized, well, actually it had changed quite a bit. The doorway was now a window. The dining room was now the living room. It was still the same house and yet it wasn't the same at all.

We know the grief of a changed hometown or a changed home, or some type of world and place we loved but can no longer really go back to. It's what makes nostalgia so good, that fleeting hope

that we could return to something that is no longer.

My daughter's birthday is coming up. She's turning seven. And don't tell her this, okay? She's here. She's not in here, but she's upstairs. She's turning seven and I bought her a landline phone for a birthday gift. It's coming up in June, and she wants it so she can call all of her school friends, and the company I bought it from had two types available. The first one has been sold out for I think maybe a year. It's a mimic of the wall phone and in their description, the website says, "It's the phone you remember from your childhood, the one that was mounted on the kitchen wall."

And I have been so disappointed that that model isn't available because that's the one I want to give her. I want to give her the one I remembered from childhood, but I can't because it's sold out, which means I think a lot of other people want to give that too.

So, the disciples at this Ascension represent a similar feeling. Things had changed. Jesus has gone up to heaven, His presence no longer in arms reach, His voice no longer audible. It would never be again the way that it was. The past is gone and the future is unclear. They have memory of Jesus but not yet really clarity on their mission. Much of the artwork from the Ascension depicts the disciples with their heads tilted up towards the sky, reflecting the story in Acts when men in white robes ask them, "Why do you stand there looking up toward heaven?" It's like Easter day when two men in white robes ask Mary Magdalene, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

In other words, the directions their eyes were pointed towards, the past, the sky, the grave, was not where they needed to be looking. Their eyes were fixed on the grave, the past, fixed on the sky, but the Resurrection and the Ascension both tell us the same thing, that the living Christ is not there. The living Christ is where new life is. And so, the disciples are at this pivotal moment and they have a very clear question to answer. What do we do now when Jesus is no longer here in the same way?

Perhaps they think that the story has gone away from them, has ended, because Jesus ascends to heaven before they are ready. It's not like they all got together and had a meeting, and said, "Okay, everybody, all disciples, I think we're ready to do this on our own now. We can tell Jesus it's time to go."

Springsteen's song, My Hometown, ends with grief. A grief that lingers in the silence of what was, and the character at the end of the song lies awake at night as an adult, questioning leaving his hometown for new ground and wake of such unwelcome change.

But the disciples' story on the Ascension Day doesn't end that same way. It doesn't end with grief. It ends with hope. They still, the disciples, they still misunderstand things. They still ask questions. They still don't really have a solid plan on what to do next. They have been the perfectly imperfect ragtag group of fishermen taking the next courageous step to follow Jesus and messing it up along the way. And thank God for that because who would want to follow in the footsteps of perfect people? Peter denies Jesus at his worst moments. Thomas doubts his resurrection. Nearly all of them ran when things got dangerous and they failed to recognize and see him when he was standing right in front of him.

And yet in this moment, in this moment of goodbye, of last moments, Jesus does not leave them with a plan or clarity. He leaves them with a blessing, a blessing that comes not after Pentecost, not after they've had any type of success, not after they finally have eyes to see and ears to hear. It's a blessing for the messy middle, a blessing that is not reward for their readiness but strength for what comes next, a blessing not given because they are ready, but precisely because they are very clearly not, a blessing that is, come what may, God has not and will not ever abandon them. Because the promise of the gospel is not that the disciples will hold forever tightly to God. The promise of the gospel is that God will never let go of us. Standing there with their heads pointed towards the sky, the disciples could not possibly imagine the changes

that would come next. They could not imagine that the Roman Empire would one day fall, that the name Pontius Pilate would lose all of its power, that the gospel would indeed travel to the ends of the earth, and ordinary people would continue carrying the love of Jesus into broken places for thousands of years. I don't think they could imagine all of us in this room together.

The Ascension is not the story of Jesus abandoning the world. The Ascension is the story of Christ going ahead of us into every part, to fill everything. The world changes and we change, but through it all, Christ remains. He is the solid footing when the world spins about us. As the old hymn goes, "Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor any trial in the present, nor any trial to come will ever separate us from the love of God and Christ Jesus, our Lord." He has gone before us into every place and there is nowhere we can go that will be hidden from him. He has blessed us not because we are perfect and not because we are ready, but because he loves us and indeed will never let us go. Amen.