

June 5, 2011  
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Once upon a time, a drop of sun caused a magical flower to grow in a faraway kingdom – a flower with the power to heal the ill and bring youth to the old. This magical flower saved the queen’s life during a difficult childbirth and the newborn baby princess now had the magic of the flower in her sun-colored hair. A wicked old woman named Gothel discovered this power in the princess, kidnapped her and hid her in a tower, pretending, as the baby grew, to be her mother. And instead of sharing the Sun’s gift of the baby’s magical hair with the world, Gothel hoarded it for herself. And so begins the story of Rapunzel...the story portrayed in the recent Disney movie, “Tangled.”

In our reading from Acts this morning, the disciples were gathered together. Jesus had risen from the dead and was with them again in a new way. They were happy and they had lots of questions: “What do you want us to do now?” “Do you think we’re ready?” “Should we stay here or should we travel to another town?” Jesus walked around the room and touched each person lightly on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, friends, I will never leave you alone. Go to Jerusalem. I want you to wait for God’s Spirit. God’s Spirit will be with you always and you will be able to tell everyone in the world about me.

And then, mysteriously, Jesus disappeared into the clouds. This is most often referred to as Jesus’ ascension...his return to the Father in heaven. As we heard these words from Acts, verse 10 and 11 tells us that “While (Jesus was ascending and they were gazing up toward heaven, two men in white robes stood by them and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” There is a world in need waiting for you. These words from the two robed men were an invitation to stop “looking upward” and to embrace the works of love that were theirs to do in the world. And so, together, the disciples went back to Jerusalem. They gathered in an upstairs room and waited. They prayed and prayed. And they wondered what would happen next. The disciples knew that Jesus was counting on them to do God’s work in the world. “Jesus taught us so many things,” said one of the disciples. “Jesus knows that we are ready to go and

spread the good news about him. Jesus knows that we can do this work now.” The disciples continued to pray and they continued to wonder....

The disciples were struggling with the idea of going out on their own, without Jesus, and sharing the gifts God had given them. They were scared, insecure, uncertain about what the future held for them. The world was dark and cruel. Rapunzel had been fed that same line by Gothel. “The world is dark and cruel. If it finds even the smallest ray of light, it destroys it.” Gothel had convinced Rapunzel that a gift like her magical hair must be protected. Her goodness must be hidden, because evil is more powerful and, eventually, will overcome the goodness. She exaggerated the evils of the world and downplayed Rapunzel’s ability to handle them. In the disciples’ minds as well, the evils of the world were exaggerated and they are unsure about their ability to handle them. That doesn’t sound all that different than the messages that we hear today, either from the world around us, or from within our own insecure minds and uncertain hearts. For the disciples, it was the fear of going out on their own, without Jesus physically being with them anymore. For Rapunzel, it was the fear of coming down out of the familiar tower, the only home she had ever know. And for us, it’s the struggle between the idea of sharing our God-given gifts with the world versus keeping them to ourselves...about stepping out of the safety and comfort zones which can sometimes confine, limit and even paralyze us, and stepping into the unknown adventures that God has in store for us.

In the movie “Tangled,” Rapunzel, now a teenager, started asking questions about the outside world. Despite the messages that she received so strongly through her life, Rapunzel had a similar nagging question swirling through her mind that the disciples heard from the two robed men...”Why do you stand looking up at heaven?” “Why do you stand here stuck in this tower?” The world is waiting for you.

At that same time, Flynn Rider climbed into her tower looking for a place to hide from the royals he had robbed.

Rapunzel convinced Flynn Rider that he needed her help and she did, indeed, come down from her tower. And the fear that had been instilled in her about the

“dark and cruel world out there” was replaced by an energy, an enthusiasm and an excitement for the adventures that were in store for her. She had a dream...and she was finally brave enough and able to follow that dream. And in spite of Flynn Rider trying to scare her back to the safety of her tower so that he could be done with their adventure, Rapunzel pushed forward and even encouraged others in living out their dreams...others who, like the disciples, and like us, didn't see the power of God's creative Spirit working in their lives....thugs, thieves, misfits, all with dreams, but without the courage to live them out.

On the day of Jesus' Ascension into heaven, the disciples were at a crossroads... a time of transition. So much had happened...Jesus had died on the cross, then had risen from the dead. And now, before their very eyes, Jesus, their mentor, their teacher, their safety net was gone. They were called out to a world in need without the strength, power and resources they had previously had. They were tentative and scared. And they were anxious and excited for what might be in store next. What was God calling them to do now? What was God's plan for them? What was God's dream?

They could have chosen to ignore God's dream, remain in their tower, the safety of their lives as fishermen, and continued to look up at the heavens, looking for Jesus. But they realized one important thing...something that we must all realize as well: The story of Jesus doesn't end with Jesus' Ascension. It continues in the lives of those who believe in them and who choose to follow him. It is clear to the disciples, especially so now that Jesus is physically gone from them, that they are not just spectators of Jesus and his power...they are *in* on the action of God...God's spirit acting *in* them. God living *in* them. Which also means, of course, in us. The disciples chose to not be just spectators but, instead, to look outward to the world in need and wait, instead, for the Spirit's breath to give them power to go out into that world and live out their dream of sharing God's love and grace. God calls us to do the same.

As you graduate from high school or college, please know that God has a dream for you...hopes and plans... for each one of you. God is calling you out of the

safety of high school, out of the familiar life as you know it today, out of the safety of your “tower” into a world that desperately needs you.

As I look at you graduates here this morning, and at baby Elivia baptized just now, I am excited to think about the possibilities that lie ahead for you and the change that you can make in your world. At the same time, there are many of us here today who are older, at a different place in life, and for whom the messages “Be careful. Be safe, the world is a dark and cruel place, don’t take risks, it’s not worth it” are even louder, and repeat even more often, ringing loudly in our ears, paralyzing us from coming down from our towers. To those who hear those messages over and above anything else, hear these words from author George Elliot: “It’s never too late to be who you might have been.” “It’s never too late to be who you might have been.”

On this day of Jesus’ Ascension, as we look ahead to the day of Pentecost and the coming power of God’s Holy Spirit, whether we are graduating from high school or college, or a student on break for the summer, or parents whose youngest is heading off to college (or whose oldest is moving back home) or grandparents whose extended families are busy with activities...God reminds us that, like Rapunzel called down from her tower, and like the disciples in the book of Acts, we are called by God, not to a “graduation,” but to a “continuation” We are called to....continue praying, continue waiting, continue listening, continue obeying, continue serving, continue DREAMING. God is calling each of us out of our towers to a future of hope, change, and dreams filled with the power that we WILL receive when the Holy Spirit comes upon us...each and every day. And that dream will look different for each one of us here today, because we are fearfully and wonderfully made, created by God as unique and beautiful individuals with unique and beautiful gifts and talents.

\*\*In our earlier clip from “Tangled,” each character in that scene was unique (some more than others) and each had different (and sometimes surprising) gifts. Rapunzel encouraged them through her song to simply embrace who God had created them to be...not to try to be something that they weren’t. And at the end of the movie, we learn that those thugs and thieves listened to God’s call to be

who He created them to be...and they did follow their dreams...to be a concert pianist, a florist, an interior designer, a mime, a cupcake baker... That's God's message to each of us as well. Don't try to be someone you aren't. In the book, Let Your Life Speak, author Parker J. Palmer writes that, at the end of time, God will not ask me "Why were you not Moses?" Instead, God will ask, "Why were you not Leann?" \*\*

So today, I ask you the same question presented to Rapunzel ...the same question presented to the disciples...Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? For if we are always looking up, is it possible that we'll miss what is right in front of us? So in the midst of the messages we hear telling us that the outside world is a dangerous place, filled with horrible, selfish people and that we must stay here where we are safe..... listen and hear God calling you, instead, to embrace who you are, embrace the gifts that God has given you, celebrate those gifts and then look outward – come out of your tower – and embrace the works of love that are specifically yours to do in this world in need.

Amen.