Saying hello is often a lot more fun than saying goodbye.

The promise of a new encounter
or the practice of greeting an old friend
can bring us joy.

Goodbyes on the other hand, aren’t always as easy.
In fact, I read an article
about a new hip way to leave a party.

It was titled, “Don’t say goodbye. Just Ghost.”

The writer went on to explain that “ghosting out”
is a term that describes leaving before the party is over
without saying any formal goodbyes.

Now, for the writer, “ghosting out” went against
everything he had been taught about good party etiquette.

But he described a situation that some of us
have probably found ourselves in.

It was his birthday and he had thrown the party.
Everyone was having a great time.
But about halfway through the party the formal goodbyes started.
Maybe you have been there.
The host is talking to someone else, maybe a group of people,
and you don’t want to be rude,
so maybe you just stand there quietly, awkwardly.
Maybe you get a little closer.
Maybe you try to seem more noticeable
or do a little fake cough.
Or, have you ever heard yourself say,
“I don’t mean to interrupt...”
and then go ahead and interrupt?
Maybe that’s followed by a nod of recognition,
or a hug, or some small talk,
or the slow petering out of conversation
and then the vague promise to reconnect sometime.
Sometimes half a party can be taken up saying goodbye.  
At least this one proponent of “ghosting out”  
  wanted his friends and readers to know  
  it’s okay with him if you leave without notice.  
  Send a nice note tomorrow.  
  Call next week to chat about the party.  
  But don’t say good bye.  
  Just ghost.

At least some of us, it seems, aren’t big fans of goodbyes.  
  Goodbyes at a party are bittersweet  
  but some goodbyes are a lot more difficult and painful.

Maybe that’s why today’s scripture story of Jesus’ final bodily goodbye,  
  what churchy folks call the “ascension”  
  isn’t that popular a holiday.  
  Maybe we just don’t want to say goodbye.

Indeed, it might be said that in a way Jesus  
  pulled a sort of ancient version of ghosting out.

Only a few disciples were with him when he left.  
  The rest were back at the prayer meeting in the upper room.  
  And he slid out the door  
  --not without style--  
  but in a very mysterious, other-worldly manner, vanishing into a cloud.

He wasn’t able to exit though without these two disciples asking him  
  the question that had lingered with them  
  during his whole ministry  
  and was burning through them now  
  that he had risen from the dead,  
  “Jesus, is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

  I wonder if by now Jesus was a bit tired of this question.  
  He’s answered it over and over again  
  and they still don’t get it.

Jesus has not come in the way they may have expected.  
  He has not thrown over the powers that be,  
  so that he can sit on Herod or Pilate or Caesar’s throne.

  They still don’t understand that’s not what his kingdom is about.
Yet, Jesus doesn’t condemn them, he doesn’t even seem impatient. He promises to send power through the Holy Spirit to keep on carrying out the good work that he and the disciples have been about his entire ministry.

It’s a message meant to strengthen the disciples but I think it might also be pretty frustrating.

Especially, when we come up with similar questions today. Like, why hasn’t God overthrown the powers that be and brought an end to all death, sickness, and destruction?

Why isn’t everything restored? Made well? Put back together? We’ve had our belly full of goodbyes and we don’t want to say them anymore, God.

I wonder if those disciples felt that way too.

Goodbyes can unleash a torrent of emotions, including sadness and anger. And so can coming face to face with the imperfect nature of life, the dashing of expectations of something more perfect, holy, and good.

Yet, when the risen Christ vanished he promised to send help and he did. He told his disciples they would use that help to change the world, to spread the good news that goodbyes aren’t really the end.

Nothing is ever the end in God. God’s work goes on and on and on. The Spirit of God goes on and on and on and we are caught up in it with love and with fire.

The disciples stand gazing toward heaven watching the risen Christ vanish in a cloud in today’s scripture text. I imagine them with mouths hanging wide open, and feeling about as sad and mournful as an abandoned child, when two angels appear and ask, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?”
This is a rhetorical question, since the angels do not give the disciples any chance to respond, and rather, continue:

“This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Now, in the Bible, a cloud, like the kind the risen Christ disappears on, is a symbol of God’s presence, especially as it appears in the pillar of cloud in Exodus for Moses and the wandering Israelites, and especially as it appears in Luke chapter nine, during Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain.

The body of the risen Christ may have disappeared but as soon as he has vanished, the angels are right there beside the disciples, reminding them they are far from alone.

We too, in our goodbyes, are far from alone.

Whether those goodbyes are at graduation or in mourning a lost loved one or at the end of a relationship.

We are not left to make these goodbyes alone.

We need not stand gazing up toward heaven for we will find Christ just as he has left in a cloud of presence that loves, leads, and transforms us.

The risen Christ may have vanished. The world may not be as we hope it would be. We may make mistakes. We may lose loved ones. We may experience many forms of loss. And yet, even in our mourning those losses, the party is never really over in God.

Acts, could be thought of as the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Luke of course, is chock full of Jesus having a good time, eating a lot of bread and enjoying his fair share of parties. As the sun breaks through the spring rain and children bloom on the playgrounds all around town and graduation parties abound,
I am reminded that Jesus enjoyed his time on this earth
and even in his last days
set forth a practice that we still celebrate today
of breaking bread and sharing cup together
in remembrance of him.

Even in the midst of our goodbyes then,
I imagine the Holy Spirit comes alongside us,
like the angels, comforting us,
moving us, and lighting us up
to celebrate the good that has been
and even in the midst of mourning
to kindle a dream of what good may yet be.

Perhaps this summer, we should make our worship a party,
where yes, we can complain and holler at God
because isn’t a wake a party too?
But where we can also laugh and sing and celebrate goodness too.

What if all our meetings and gatherings were celebrations
-times to say look what God is doing here!
Look how the presence of God has come alive in this church
in our neighborhoods, and in our world!

Despite all the heartache, brokenness, and sorrow,
I wonder what the presence of God
still may do with us?

Indeed, then perhaps we will find Jesus the same way he left,
in a cloud of presence all around us.

When that happens friends, it will be like we never really said goodbye,
but the risen Christ was right here with us all along,
still turning over tables,
still pushing us onward,
still loving us,
still empowering us,
still setting a feast before us
no matter what goodbyes we must make.

Like a warm hello from a loved one we have longed to see,
may that truly bring joy to our lives
and indeed the world.

May it be so. Amen.