

Sunday, May 24, 2020
Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Acts 1.6-14

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/839050159951150/>

(Sermon begins at about 16:30)

“Preparing for What Comes Next”

There are those awkward moments in the church calendar where we don't quite know what is happening. When something has happened, but we are in an in-between time waiting for what is to come next. When we are left with a feeling of, “now what?” When we are left with a feeling of uncertainty, maybe even emptiness. We went through one of those “moments” seven weeks ago—that awkward time between Jesus' death on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter morning. Holy Saturday, that time when the world was empty as Jesus lies in the tomb. Despite having been told by Jesus that he would be killed and then raised to new life, the disciples certainly felt that sense of being alone, of being abandoned. Sure, Jesus said he would return on the third day, but the disciples seemed a little uncertain as to whether that would indeed be the case. And even in our own time, this side of the resurrection, when we know exactly what happens, that time between Good Friday and Easter Day is still an empty, lonely time. Where it almost feels as if Jesus really is gone and we are left on our own.

We are in another such time in our march through the liturgical calendar. This past Thursday we entered another period not unlike Holy Saturday. Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension, when Jesus departed from his disciples and ascended into heaven. This event is recorded in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. So, what happens now that Jesus has ascended? Remember our Gospel reading from last week? Jesus promised “I will not leave you orphaned” (Jn 14.18a). He promised “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever” (Jn 14.16). He promised the disciples that the Holy Spirit would come to be with them, to be a constant guide and companion as they continued the work he began. But when? When? Jesus didn't put a timeframe on the coming of the Holy Spirit.

We are told, “While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?’” (Acts 1.10-11a). In all likelihood, they stood gazing, perplexed because they could not believe what they were seeing. They had certainly never seen anyone just start to rise up into the sky before. Or maybe they were gazing just as we would stand gazing as a dear friend or family member drives away after a visit—a prolonged, silent, good-bye. But in my mind's eye, they are gazing with sad, puppy dog eyes; with expressions on their faces that said, “wait, where are you going? You can't leave us. We just got you back.” I imagine that they were feeling a bit lost. Okay, a lot lost. Sure, Jesus promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to be with them. But what does that even mean? What does that look like? And more importantly, when will this Holy Spirit come? How long are we going to have to wait? Of course, we know that it was ten days between the Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But the disciples had no idea as they watched Jesus ascending into heaven—the last time they

would ever see him. For all they knew, it could be a few minutes, or it could be days, weeks, even months. What were they going to do in the meantime?

Luke, the author of Acts, tells us precisely what the disciples did. "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet . . . When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying . . . All [the disciples] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1.12-14). They didn't just sit around and twiddle their thumbs. They didn't (at least by all appearances), sit around and engage in idle speculation about what Jesus might have meant about sending an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be with them. They didn't try to second-guess that this Holy Spirit would be like. They had faith that Christ knew what he was doing. What they also knew was that whatever was coming next, they needed to be ready. So, they immediately set about doing what they could to prepare themselves for what would come next. Whatever that would be. Whenever that would be.

By our very nature, we want to be prepared. We want to be proactive. But sometimes that just isn't possible. At least not as much as we would like. We just aren't always able to know all the whys and wherefores of a coming situation to be able to anticipate all possibilities, all contingencies. Sometimes, we just don't have enough information. Which leaves us with only one option. Well, two options, actually. We can spin out of control worrying about what MIGHT happen and what MIGHT need to be done. Or we can be patient. We can trust in our Lord and his faithfulness to us; we can trust his word. We can trust that he will deliver in his own good time, when the time is right for us. In which case, there is only one thing we can really do to prepare. Pray. To spiritually prepare ourselves to be open to receiving whatever it is that Christ, that God, has in store. To summon our spiritual resources so that when the time is right, when the time does arrive, we are open to receiving what is so graciously given. And to be in a better position to immediately jump in and do what the Spirit bids us to do, to go where the Spirit invites us to go.

I kind of feel like we are in one of those awkward moments in our own lives, in the midst of this pandemic and the resulting "Safer at Home" order. This whole time has been an awkward moment in some ways. But perhaps even more so now. Up until now, everyone in our society has been in the same boat. We were to shelter in place unless we happened to be an "essential worker" who could not work from home. But now, things are changing. We are in stage two of the governor's plan for opening up of our society and our economy. Some "non-essential businesses" have started to open up again. And this makes us antsy. It makes us anticipate what is coming next. We wonder when the next change will happen. Perhaps most important for us in the church is that we wonder when we will be able to open up. When we will be able to start worshiping in our own church again. We know that churches opening for in-person worship will not occur until stage three of the governor's plan. But as we see other functions slowly open, some are asking "if those businesses can return, why can't we? Isn't the church more essential than many of those businesses that are already open?" I understand why the orders are what they are, but I also understand the frustrations that I hear increasingly expressed.

I get it. It doesn't feel good right now because there is nothing that we can do to change it. The orders are what they are, and for good reason. Namely, to protect ourselves and one another.

Even if some may not agree with them. Even the president is now demanding that all churches be open as of today, stating that religious institutions are essential. I agree. We are essential. But I do not agree that we should be allowed to open for in-person worship. Not yet. And it is important to keep in mind that just because we have not been open for in-person worship, does not mean that we are absent, that we are not functioning. Because we are. We are still doing our job, fulfilling our purpose. Just in a different way than we have been used to.

And frankly, the ultimate authority in this matter is not President Trump. It is not even Governor Newsom or Mayor Garcia. Yes, they can identify restriction. They can issue guidelines. They can make suggestions. But as a parish in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, our authority in such matters is Bishop Taylor. We cannot return until our Bishop says so. And trust me, Bishop Taylor is working hard to get us there. He is developing plans. He is agonizing over this as much as any of us. And he wants to get us open as soon as is safely possible. Because that is the number one priority—keeping you safe, keeping me safe. But until certain criteria are met, we just don't know when we can return or what that will look like.

Which leaves us in the same position as the disciples following Jesus' ascension and before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Uncertain as to what will happen and when it will happen. So, what do we do? We take a page from the disciples' playbook, of course. If "constantly devoting themselves to prayer" was what was needed to prepare them for what was to come next, that should be what we do, as well.

Of course, devoting ourselves to prayer is more than just saying a few prayers now and then. In its broadest sense, devoting ourselves to prayer encompasses everything we have been doing for the last nine weeks. Continuing our regular Sunday worship services, irregular though they may be. Participating in communal services of Morning Prayer with St. Thomas and Evening Prayer here at St. Gregory's. Participating in weekly communal Centering Prayer. These are all, of course, forms of prayer. But there are other things we are doing that I would argue fall within the realm of "devoting ourselves to prayer," such as weekly Bible Study and our book study of Barbara Brown Taylor's *An Altar in the World*. While these are not strictly about prayer, these study opportunities provide us with another form of spiritual nurture that feed and enrich our spiritual selves. Which invite us to go even deeper in our own personal devotions and spiritual disciplines.

All these services, programs, and activities are means of providing and slowly but surely building the foundations of our individual and collective spiritual lives. The foundations on which our lives of faith and service are built. The foundations that undergird and support our lives of faith and service. The foundations that will, because of this time in diaspora, be strengthened and made more solid, even as we prepare for the eventuality of returning to a more normal way of being and doing church. Which will prepare us to be in a better position to be the Body of Christ as we move into the future. Whatever that looks like. Whenever that will be. Not unlike the disciples who engaged in prayer and other activities as a way of preparing for whatever it was that would come next for them.

Being in a time of waiting can be uncomfortable. It can be anxiety-producing. But what we learn from the disciples following Jesus' ascension is that this time is not to be wasted. It is a time

that we cannot waste. As I've said before, we have a unique opportunity here. We have an opportunity to hit the reset button when it comes to being the Church. We have the opportunity to live into a new vision of who we are as God's beloved children, of who we are as the Body of Christ. But to do so, we must be willing to follow the lead of the disciples by constantly devoting ourselves to those disciplines that will prepare us for what comes next.

Jesus spoke words of assurance, but also words of commissioning, to his disciples right before his ascension. The last words he spoke to them. "It is not for you to know the time or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come to you; and you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1.7-8). Like the disciples, we don't know when things will change. But we do know that they will change. And we need to be ready. Thanks to the work we do now and have been doing all along, we will be ready.