



“After Easter”

a sermon by

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Acts 1:3-14

Believe it or not Easter does not end with brunch on Sunday afternoon, but rather extends in its liturgical season for 7 weeks, about the amount of time Christ was said to be on earth with his disciples after his resurrection and before his ascension into heaven, when he gave the disciples a largely unrecorded instruction about the task of discipleship without him.

You will recall after the resurrection account in Luke, that the disciples meet Jesus on the road as a stranger and talk with him about the events of the past several days. It is not until he broke bread with them that they recognized him and he blessed them and rose to heaven and the disciples rejoiced.

This particular gospel account is significant because it is believed to be the end of the first book of a two volume series, the second being Acts. Acts is appropriately named as it chronicles the dawn of a new kind of church, a church founded on the life and death of Jesus, and given a proclamation of resurrection that would echo throughout the centuries. Indeed, there is a lot of action in Acts. And so it is with this early account of the church after that first Easter that we will begin to look at the impact of the resurrected Christ upon the community of faith, and we will meditate upon the power of the Word in the World.

Our Scripture comes from Acts 1:3-14. “After his suffering Jesus presented himself alive to the apostles by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 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? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”

This scripture passage does not gain much of a hearing from the pulpit - the book of Acts itself is relegated to just a few weeks in the ecumenical lectionary after Easter, and this passage does not make the cut. But these first chapters in the book of Acts are among some of my favorite in the Bible, perhaps because I myself have faced so many new beginnings in my own life, or perhaps because they are the early days of a church that I have come to love so intensely and so, like recalling those young salad days of a now familiar relationship they exude the joy and fear and wonder and excitement on which all else is built. But they also recall that tension of finally letting go of the familiar, and plunging into the depths of the unknown that is what is required of us after Easter.

Perhaps I like this text because, for all the bumbling of the disciples when they are with Jesus, it is not until they join the ranks of the rest of us post-resurrection Christians that I feel like I can really begin to identify with them, when they are all called to bear witness to the life of a man they cannot see. And for all their education, the miracles performed in their midst, the prophesies of resurrection, even the instruction of Jesus in those 40 days, they come to see that after Easter they are only just getting started. And, despite the meal preparations, choir rehearsals, Lenten practices, and Easter lilies, so are we.

As Bill Wood pointed out in his Easter Sunday sermon, the proclamation of the messenger to the women at the empty tomb is both wonderful and terrifying - "go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee." Go out and tell the news of the resurrection, and trust that Jesus is going ahead of you. Even after death his gospel continues.

And now we stand shoulder to shoulder with the disciples as they await the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, as they hear the last words of Jesus, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

On Easter Sunday the story of the faith is not complete, the role of the disciples then does not end with them staring up at the sky, they do not scatter to contemplate the events of the last weeks in isolation, but draw together as a community and prepare themselves to receive God's empowerment to carry the Word from the sacred halls of Jerusalem to the dangerous courts of Rome. For Christ goes before them in the promise of the Spirit, and they are called to his side in a whole new way.

John Robinson writes of the resurrection, "For the disciples during those first shattering hours, Jesus had become a memory. He was someone they had known and loved and lost. They had shared with him a depth of living they had not guessed before. All their hopes for a better way of life were centered in him, - and lost with him - buried and sealed in the tomb. It was all over. They had been quickened by a vision of what life could be, but now they must face life as it was. Back to reality! And then it happened.

It came to them - rather, as they could only describe it, he came to them. The life they had known and shared was not buried with him but alive in them. Jesus was not a dead memory but a living presence."

As readers of Acts, as disciples of Jesus, we inherit the celebration and the promise of this early community- that the story is not complete when Christ ascends into the clouds, for if Christ is indeed resurrected from the dead, then truly still today he goes before us in all things, is powerfully present to heal and restore, to offer a word of comfort and hope, to clothe and to feed, and as the disciples were sent away to ponder, is alive and well in us--ordinary people called and empowered by God to continue the life and ministry that was only just getting started when that young prophet, son of God and Savior of us all, was hung on a cross, resurrected to new life, and ascended into heaven.

Who would have guessed that through the disciples that stared up into the clouds in

wonder, that gathered together in a single room to devote themselves to prayer and await the Spirit of God, - that through those disciples who offered a smile to a stranger or emailed a word of encouragement to a friend, who joined together on Wednesday afternoons or Sunday evenings, or Thursday mornings, or any other day for that matter in upper rooms, and board rooms, courtrooms, and chat rooms, anywhere that the community of faith is gathered and believers interject a word of truth about Jesus Christ into the world that the gospel of salvation would be spread to the ends of the earth. That they would become the Word of God, living and active, alive in the world today.

Many years ago as a student I had the good fortune to go on an art history tour to Florence, Italy. We toured every museum and cathedral in the city and surrounding areas, absorbing beauty and insights into reality that artists have a unique gift for revealing. I will never forget our last day in the city, we had saved our tour of the Academy for last - it housed the treasured statue of Michelangelo's David that promised to be a stunning finale to our extensive tour of Florence before we would move on to a final day in Rome, Italy and then back to Rome, Georgia. Talk about culture shock.

The Academy itself was beautiful in an understated kind of way - and we moved quickly through its other exhibits in order to see the David in plenty of time before the museum closed for the day. All of our study and discussions had led up to this piece and it did not disappoint. Recently restored, it glowed from within; stony marble somehow appeared soft and supple, white as Easter lilies. Elements of artistry and linear perspective, and creative license combined to form a perfect and towering piece that left you feeling enamored and elated. It was a celebration of life to be sure and I walked away from the statue feeling a sense of closure and contentment. Truly my experience of this place had been capped off quite nicely. I browsed casually among the other rooms of sculpture and paintings as I waited for my classmates to finish their own celebration of the piece when I rounded a corner and was stopped in my tracks. In an obscure corner alone in a small room was a painting that had no title, no name but seemed to be a 13th or 14th century piece given the hues of paint that had clearly yellowed with the aging of egg whites used in its pigments. I don't remember crossing the room, but before I knew it I stood before it, transfixed. It was unusual among the scenes of Christ - here the Savior had just been taken down from the cross. His head hung and matted hair obscured his bloodied face. The crown of thorns gorged deep into his brow, his body was filthy and limp. Golgotha loomed in the background. You saw only the torsos of its subjects and Jesus was supported by two figures who held his hands draped over each of their shoulders. On the right was John, looking sad and resigned but stoic. On the left, supporting the weight of his lifeless body, was his mother Mary. It was her gaze that grounded me to the spot. Eyes red and wide but dry from a reservoir of tears long emptied, face exhausted and creased well beyond her years, she stared straight out of the canvas and into the eyes of the onlooker.

Her expression was frank, unapologetic, and absolutely unmistakable: What are you going to do about it? - What are you going to do about it? And with an earthy, emotive grit, in a piercing gaze that left you no where to turn but within yourself there was no choice but to go out into the world transformed, and tell what Christ had done. In its implicit commission it held more power than a thousand perfectly sculpted statues.

We were made believers on Easter Sunday, and now we are called to be witnesses.

Perhaps you find yourself staring into the sky with the apostles today. Perhaps you are in that joyful room of the gathered community of faith awaiting the work of the Spirit and confident of God's promises. Maybe you are still standing before the open tomb or staring at a rock that conceals your Savior that seems impossible to move.

Acts shouts from the rooftops that Jesus goes before you in all things; he equips you to carry out the gospel of his resurrection, and is with you always. It challenges us to live out the truth that together we are his body, we are his prayer, we are his laughter, and we are his Word. And so we are called together as the people of God to be the living body of Christ, in all the places we find ourselves along the journey, to take up our commission and carry this gospel to the ends of the earth.

Believe it or not, Easter is only the beginning. What are you going to do about it?