

St. Paul's Congregational Church, May 13, 2018
Luke 24: 44-52 – Easter 7/Ascension Sunday
You are Witnesses
Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We are invited on the Seventh Sunday of Easter to enter a period of waiting once more. But this period of waiting is different; it's the pause between the hope of the past and the hope for the future. It is sometimes hard to hold this space because we're so eager to move on and find new direction. Moving on – that's what we want to do when we've experienced a loss, a time of transition, isn't it. But if we move on too quickly, maybe we miss one of the most important lessons of life. It's the *in-between* that invites us to find depth and to hold the anxiety and fears of the future at bay and embrace this one moment.

Today brings us to the end of the Easter season in the church calendar – the calendar that begins with the advent story of preparation for the birth of Christ, the Christmas season where we celebrate the coming of the prince of peace, the epiphany season when we note God's declaration of who this Jesus is – then came Lent when we walked the long and hard road into Jerusalem, experienced the horror and sadness of Holy Week, and then the unspeakable joy of Easter. During this Easter season we heard again the age old stories about the resurrection, Jesus' appearances, the disciples finally coming to really believe that their beloved Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. Then 40 days after the resurrection comes Ascension Day, the day when Jesus parted from the disciples again, carried up into heaven.

Now, I didn't grow up observing Ascension Sunday in my church – maybe not many Protestant churches do – I know it's a big deal in the Roman Catholic tradition – but as I've been reflecting this week, I'm a little sorry to have missed this, but grateful for an epiphany I had this week. That's why I changed the gospel reading this morning – maybe because I'm now doing interim ministry I have a deeper appreciation for transition times, in-between times in the church.

I've come to realize that in the same way Easter doesn't make sense without Good Friday and Good Friday doesn't make sense without Easter – Pentecost doesn't make sense without Ascension Day and Ascension Day doesn't make sense without Pentecost. And while I've always loved the Pentecost celebration, often with the Rite of Confirmation, the birthday of the church, maybe I've lost something by jumping over Ascension Day and the promises of that time.

For 40 days the disciples have enjoyed appearances of the Risen Lord – after the horror of Good Friday, the joy of Easter, during Eastertide he's still among them – but he tells them this is not going to last – at least not in the same way. So, today, here we are on the 7th Sunday of Easter, straddling the past and the future – that most uncomfortable “in between time”, wondering, now what. What's to become of us without Jesus teaching and leading us... but Jesus tells the disciples, tells us, that we too will be clothed with power from on high – that we are witnesses, that we are to continue to tell the story – we have Jesus' final words to his disciples, according to Matthew: the Great Commission, Go therefore and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That power and authority will come on Pentecost. We know that as we look back on the story – but the disciples hearing these words didn't. Imagine those disciples wondering, now what do we do without Jesus in our midst, leading us, teaching us, showing us the way. What does all this mean, anyway – and maybe that's the purpose of the Easter season – to understand how this journey and especially how the resurrection helps us to be what we have been called to be. It's a time of discernment, a transition time for the disciples.

It is for us as well because we're in a transition time too here, aren't we as we look ahead – we too ask, what comes next? We'll soon be wishing James well as he moves to Florida – after 19 years in this community, he'll be in a new place – one with no snow, blizzards, cold! And we're both sad and happy for him at the same time – and talk about transition times – there's not a much tougher transition than moving – especially so far away! And our transition time between settled pastors, this interim time, for us as church continues – we are at a point in our story where we ask ourselves as do the disciples, how God is calling each of us and what is God calling us to be and do. What are we called to do as a community? How do we keep our dreams for this church alive? How do we “go therefore and make disciples.”

How do we move between the remembrance of the past into the hope of the future? What indeed does it mean to move on? Move on to what?

I can only imagine what those first disciples were feeling – how can all this continue? They are convinced that Jesus is the son of God – that in Christ they had seen the fullness of God – as much of God as they ever could or hope to see. They thought, they knew, he was God. But how do they help others see Jesus for who he really was. How much more difficult can this be for us, removed by generations from knowing Jesus on earth.

This is a week in our church calendar when we observe maybe a bit of a time-out – the time between the Ascension and Pentecost. A transition time to regroup – a time to look back though we know we can't go back - and at the same time, look ahead to new possibilities, asking what's next?

This time of year is a transition time for many of us too – our seniors are looking back on their school years – but also looking ahead to new opportunities and challenges. Many of them are also asking, what's next. And I know parents are looking forward with mixed emotions as their sons and daughters move away from home to that new chapter in their lives. It's a new experience, a new chapter for those parents, too, isn't it. Generates anxiety but also a sense of joy, of promise, too.

How can we know what the process of discernment looks like? It seems to me that discernment must be intentional – we have to stop and work the process – take a time out, if you will.

And Jesus gives us some guidelines: he prays that the community be unified; that the community fulfill Jesus' joy; and that the life of the church be distinct from the life of the world. And today, that's a real challenge and opportunity for the church – to be in the world but not of the world. We are surrounded by chaos and anxiety, aren't we – but, you know, we have such good news to share: our God is ever so much bigger and stronger and more loving than we can imagine; our God never changes; our God surrounds us with strength and courage and love and shows us the way to change the world, bringing in a world of peace and justice. It's not easy – but we can do this! But only with God's help.

Jesus' prayer for us helps us identify those outcomes we seek in the discernment process : new life coming out of death. New life coming out of change – perhaps entirely new, perhaps a natural outgrowth of a direction we've been taking – whether that new direction is our choice or not.

This reminds me of something that happened a couple years ago during our vacation Bible School when while a mom was participating there with her children, her husband called her during one morning session and told her he'd just lost his job. She was of course rattled, but there was little

fear. She said, you know, we've been thinking about doing something radically new for us and now this just might be the chance to do that. And they did just that. How many times have we heard people say the same thing – I would never have had the courage to do what I've always wanted to do, I'd add, to do what God calls me to do, unless I was forced into it. The same kind of thing happened for me when I was forced into something new when my prior church could no longer afford two full time ministers. Maybe you've had that same experience:

New life coming out of the death of a comfortable, old life.

That's what God wants for us and from us – that's what Jesus prays for us – that we are protected from the evil one in the midst of the world – that we might have a sacred joy made complete in us. That we may be in the world but not of the world – that while we are in the world we know that we belong to God and that God will always protect us.

And to have joy made complete in us – maybe we understand that best as modeling our lives after Jesus' life and living the gospel commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. You know, that's really pretty simple: treat others as we want to be treated. So simple that we can miss it.

I remember when one of the confirmands went to the soup kitchen for the first time – as we drove home I asked him what he thought – he said it was great! To be able to help people in a concrete way was amazing for him – he had a new sense of joy, of purpose – and the bags of groceries put in the shopping cart each week took on new meaning – these food items go to real people who are hungry – when is the last time a jar of peanut butter and jelly or a box of cereal was a real gift to you? Or a fresh orange or crisp apple, red ripe tomatoes, fresh warm bread, a dozen eggs - we take so much for granted, don't we. His eyes were opened in a new way as he distributed donations – and he spoke over and over again about how every person said thank you. So much gratitude from some who have so little – at least according to our standards.

Jesus prays that we will be in the world but not of the world – and he knows the stakes are high. Jesus calls us to bring the world back on the path. And we all have the ability to do that – perhaps in small ways but we all have the ability. The question is, figuring out what our part is and, then, will we do it?

Knowing that God has uniquely blessed with all the gifts we need to be God's reflection in the world and living this way makes it possible for others to see our gifts and to see God in us.

As Christians, for what will we be known? Will we be known for damaging our mother earth out of greed to the point where we end life as we

know it? Will we use our voice for justice and peace rather than to further violence and conflict? Will we generously feed our hungry neighbors every day? Every time we shop, will we think of our neighbors? Will we invite prayerful contemplation in every decision, knowing that the answer is there – we only need to be still so we might hear God's call.

We who gather this morning love this church – care about the future of this church don't we – we know in order to move into our future we have to expand, enhance our ministry here and in the community. And that's frightening isn't it. We can get so stuck when we get anxious - but let's take a time-out: let us remember the stories and let them work in and through us to make this a better church, a better world – a world of peace which is not the absence of war, but of a peace that passes all human understanding. It's ours for the making through the grace of God who loved us enough to come to earth as a man, fully human, fully divine to show us the way.

As we approach the festival of Pentecost, let us be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Let us move from the joy of Easter as a re-creation of new life with the hope that guides us all to be God's love in the world. How does God lead the early church, and the church today, even when it feels like we're in an "interim" period? What are the new directions in which this God leads us? What are the ways that we can hear the voice of God still speaking in our lives, individually and communally?

Friends, we can do this! God is with us as we take our time-out. God is with us, still speaking. Jesus will show us the way. Praise God for that! Praise God for this church, God's church empowered to do God's work.

Amen.

Let us pray: we praise you, O God of glory: for the resurrected Jesus who has given us life and light. For the words of our Savior which inspire and strengthen us. For the people who share this time of worship with us, and those around the world who share the great confession that Jesus is Lord. We thank you, God, for what you have shared with us, how you have worked for us, that we may live the hope of the gospel with neighbors near to us and around the world. Amen.