

St. Paul's Congregational Church, May 21, 2017
 St. Paul's Congregational Church
 May 28, 2017; Acts 1:6-14; Easter 7A
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We are nearly at the end of our journey through Eastertide – we've walked with the disciples as they've tried to deal with the extraordinary events of the crucifixion, the resurrection, the appearances of Jesus among them – we've walked with them as they struggle to figure out what's next – through their doubts, fears, how do they continue the ministry Jesus called them into; they've had conversations with Jesus over time – he's tried to reassure them, reassure us, that we're never alone, that God is always with us – he's challenged them, challenged us, and told us that we will even do greater works than he did! We also know that the disciples didn't understand – they were afraid – just like we are when our worlds are turned upside down – when our stability, our rock, our security is gone – for whatever reason.

Jesus has told the disciples to return to Jerusalem. They obeyed. And we meet them today, as we observe Ascension Sunday, in an upper room where he came to them for the last time. They knew this was coming – they had all dreaded this moment. So they crowded into those last moments everything they could. Just like we do when we know something new is about to happen – just like we do when our lives are in transition – we do our best to hold on, don't we.

They were still full of questions – when will you restore the kingdom of Israel?" He tells them, it is not for you to know the time nor the period. But he promises, again, you will receive the power and this is the promise of Pentecost.

And after those words, he left them standing there looking up; as Jesus left the earth he loved, moving upward into the heavens until he was out of sight. And they stood there, looking up, feeling abandoned, feeling terribly sad. They squinted, they wondered, they stood open-mouthed- probably more than a little afraid. Now it's real – he's gone. Now we are really in transition – it's just us now. Haven't we all felt perhaps something like this in the transition times of our own lives?

Yes, Jesus is going away, is gone, but there is still hope: in this history book of the early church, the author of Acts, Luke, tells us he left those disciples, left us, the keys that would unlock the closed doors of their lives, of our lives now.

That major shift begins – a whole change of focus – two men, presumably angels, came to speak to them – “turn your gaze from heaven to earth. Return to jobs and families you've left, return to a world that still doesn't believe.” So, they did. And then in another upper room, surrounded by people as ordinary as you and me – the Spirit came. But that's the story of Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit – known as the birthday of the church which we'll celebrate that next week.

So, what are those keys that will unlock the closed doors of our lives – as individuals and as the Body of Christ here at St. Paul's: first is a shift from heaven to earth – we're asked not to simply gaze upward to heaven, wondering if we'll ever see

Jesus again. We're asked to focus on the reality of every day. Look around, look closer. The church in every age has had trouble with these directions, hasn't it.

Today there is a great surge of interest in spirituality – more of the women of Bread for the Journey tell me they consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.” Haven't you heard that? What does that mean? We know people are hungry for something besides malls, money, competition, the rat race – there are racks of books, conferences, spiritual advisors available to help us find whatever it is that might touch these deep yearnings of our lives. But Acts warns us that if this spirituality is not rooted in the world of every day, it will just be another burden on an over-committed calendar. Just another thing to do rather than the opportunity for life transformation. Following Jesus gives us that opportunity for transformation. God loves us. Jesus is always with us.

The second key says we find light when we move from God to one another. The Acts story of ascension tells us if we want to see God we are to look around us. We find God when we really see other people – and the world around us. We find God when we look closer at the lives of those all around us – when we truly love each other - when we look for God's face in each other – because, it's there my friends. Remember that line from *Les Miserables*: to love another person is to see the face of God. And we need this time together in worship in our church community to give us the strength to do that in our daily lives.

Anne Lamott tells in her book “Traveling Mercies” why she makes her son Sam, go to church. She started going to St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in San Francisco early in her pregnancy. One Sunday at the end of the service she stood up and told the congregation that she was pregnant and people cheered. She was not married and she did not expect that reaction. She reported that even people raised in conservative Bible-thumping homes in the deep south clapped and clapped. The old women whose grown-up boys had been in jails or prisons rejoiced with her.

They reached out their arms and adopted her. They brought clothes and blankets for the new baby. They lugged in casseroles that she could freeze and use later. The church members kept telling her that this new baby was going to be part of their church family. And then they began to slip her money. A bent-over woman on Social Security would come to her and stuff her pockets with tens and twenties. Ancient Mary Williams always sat in the back of the church and brought Anne baggies filled with dimes week after week.

When Anne brought Sam to that church the first time he was just five days old. Church folk stood in line and called him “our baby” and “my baby.” People in that little church kept her going – they cared, reached out, prayed, and loved her and saw through some very hard days. Anne says that Mary Williams still gives her bags of dimes now and then, even though she is doing much better financially. Anne says she gives them to homeless people. But she writes, “Why do I make Sam go to church – none of his other friends go. I make him go because somebody brings me dimes.” For when Anne looked around her in that church she saw the face of God.

Isn't that a challenge to us – look around this church, this gathering. Where do you see the face of God? How do you know it when you see it? And then look around you on the train, in your school, in your home, in your workplace – for the face of God is there too. First of all, we have to look. We have to look closer.

And that's the third key: the angel told the disciples to redirect their gaze – look around you – look beyond you – look closer. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes over you and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the world.

Since the beginning of time, people have been categorized into “us” and “them” – perhaps the categories are changed but it still happens, doesn't it. Outsiders vs. insiders – and churches are no exception to that. In fact, we see that first great shift in Acts when the church was forced to move out beyond themselves into the world of the outsider. Remember so much of what Jesus had taught through the parables – the Good Samaritan for example. The young church was forced into a new world – into a world beyond themselves. How important is all this to us today – we have to look beyond ourselves don't we – and we have a number of examples of opportunities to do that – even as small as bringing a box of cereal for the Food Pantry, bringing a goodie to share at our coffee hour, contributing to our communion offerings, volunteering your time and energy to projects, big or small, here at the church. We're called to look beyond our comfort zones, our blessings – look beyond ourselves. Not just once in a while but all the time! And why do we do this? Because Jesus tells us to.

If we really get this ascension story – we begin to understand that there is no “them” – there is only “us”. And that understanding enables all sorts of walls to crumble and fall.

The last key moves us from the general to the specific – God never calls us to generalities but to specifics. This call could be anything from quitting a destructive habit or letting go of the past, perhaps there's some rage or hatred that is strangling you. What is one thing you need to do? Sometimes we have to look a whole lot closer to determine that – and often that's hard, painful, risky. But that's our mission. We are called to change our focus.

William Willimon tells about making a decision to leave his church to serve another parish. That's never an easy decision, believe me. But he did it.

Soon afterward but before he moved and began his new call, the church voted to allow any Christian from other denominations to join their congregation without rebaptism. Now this may not sound like a big deal to us but in some traditions it is indeed a very big, radical deal. Moving to an open membership policy was a huge step for this church. Lots of discussion – lines were drawn. And the vote was very close. Many were extremely upset, angry

A few people called Willimon and told him the church had “some problems.” They told him they just wanted him to come and help mend the fences.

He says as the movers were packing his belongings, he received a second call. This time from the local church association who had called a special meeting to investigate the new church's policy and they wanted him to be there. When he hung up the phone he remembers thinking, why am I packing – maybe I should stop. What am I walking into?

The first Sunday of his new call was Easter Sunday – he arrived in town on Good Friday. On that first day he went with six members of his new church and drove to the Association Office to be questioned on their open membership policy. He says, it was all downhill from there. The Association voted to dismiss the church at the denominational meeting months later.

What in the world was the new pastor to do? He met with angry parishioners and listened to their concerns. He met with people who felt they had won. The church was deeply divided and he saw no way out of the impasse. I can't imagine beginning a ministry under these conditions! Weeks later in absolute frustration he preached on a Deuteronomy passage where the children of Israel had wandered in the wilderness far too long – the text said, “We have circled this mountain long enough. It is time to move northward.”

In his sermon he said, “We have been fair. We have listened. We have followed every procedure. I have done as your new pastor all I know how to do. We cannot stay at this place of conflict forever. It will cripple this church. It is time to move on.”

And the church did. God opened a door. They adopted 10 Vietnamese refugees. A realtor made a house available. People donated furniture. People gave money for clothing and groceries. People taught them English and helped them with tasks like shopping and paying bills. It was hard. And it was good. But what that church did without knowing it, was change their focus. And their old problems were not as big as they thought they were. They changed their focus and changed a church.

Little did they know that they were really following the advice of those angels two thousand years ago who had told another group of reluctant disciples to quit gazing into heaven and to look closer at hand.

Let us follow that advice too – let us devote ourselves to prayer and to the doors that God will still open as we return to the world and look closer. God is still speaking to us at St. Paul's – ad that's a wonderful thing. God will do awesome things through us here at St. Paul's and in the world. I'm convinced of that – I hope you are too. The world needs what we have to offer – let's go forth together and go through those open doors – and see the face of God in all we meet. And be the face of God for all we meet. We can do this! Amen.