

Wesley United Methodist Church
Easter 6
May 17, 2020
Empowered and Sent Forth
Scripture: Acts 1:1-11
Luke 24:44-53

Do you find yourself often asking what day it is? That has become more common for many of us. When our schedule is disrupted and the things we normally rely upon to help us mark time are not present, it can be easy to lose track of what day it is or where we are in the calendar. A colleague shared that her 4-year-old son was talking about something that happened “in the season when we could see people.” She asked him how many days they had been staying at home and he said, “seventy hundred nine”. I can’t disagree with him.

For early Christians, one of the road marks of time was the end of the Easter season – 40 days after Easter, the Day of Ascension. For the early church, this festival was an important holiday – far more important than Christmas. Ascension marks the end of the 40 days following Jesus’ resurrection when he spent time with his disciples. It is commemorated as the day when he ascended or “went-up” into heaven.

There are all sorts of works of art that depict this visually. **(include a few of the pictures of the ascension here.)** For people of my generation this may feel sort of like James Kirk on Star Trek saying “Beam me up Scottie” but whether we think about this literally or symbolically, Ascension does mark a very important time in the life of the church. The disciples had spent three years with Jesus learning from him. When he died, they were devastated. After his death, they hid in fear. When he rose, they were

confused and excited. Ascension marks the time when he left their earthly presence.

It was a confusing time and a real transformation for the disciples. After the Ascension, instead of hiding, they were “continually in the temple blessing God.” They were also waiting for the Holy Spirit which we celebrate next week as coming to them in a powerful way on Pentecost. Once they received the Holy Spirit, they became bold. They found their voices and began to speak truth to power. They went about preaching and teaching and spreading the good news about Jesus throughout the land.

Ascension was like a hinge point for them - a real game changer – a time after which everything was different. I think that Covid-19 is like a hinge point for us as well. I imagine that for a long time to come we will be talking about before Covid-19 and during or after Covid-19. For us, just like for my colleague’s child, there was a season when we could see people and a season when we see people through our computer and phone screens or over the telephone.

This is changing life for all of us in many ways and we do not yet know what that is going to look like 3 months, 6 months, a year or two years down the road.

The disciples thought they knew what the world would, or should, look like down the road. They fully expected that Jesus would fulfill their dreams, so when they gathered, they asked Jesus, “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” In other words, is this the time when you will free us from Roman oppression? Is it now?

Frequently Jesus’ responses didn’t seem to answer their questions, and this was no exception. He told them that instead something better was coming. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,

and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” They must have wondered what kind of answer that was.

Today, one of the big questions, hopes or dreams is that we will soon “get back to normal” – meaning that we will go back to living the way we did before Covid-19. Indeed, on Thursday, President Trump said that “we are not closing our country” if the U.S. is hit by a second wave of Covid-19.ⁱ Some warn us that we have not yet gotten through the first wave as cases continue to spike in various places. The debate continues about how and when we will re-open various parts of the economy and of our lives.

I think it’s important for all of us to realize that there is no going back to the way things were, whatever we think that looks like. We have been profoundly affected by this pandemic and that changes us in ways that we cannot simply ignore and pretend didn’t exist.

Churches are asking when we will resume in-person worship and I don’t know the answer to that question or to many others. What I do know is that for this congregation we will be looking not at either one way or another, but at a “both and” multiple ways of doing worship and everything else. We have learned that on-line worship provides opportunities for people to worship when they are not able to worship in person for any number of reasons.

We are learning that there are many ways to gather together even while being physically apart. I think that there are important things for us to learn from the story of Ascension that can and do apply to us today.

The first very important thing is that Jesus promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would come to them, and not only come to them but bring power to them. Even though the visible Jesus would be gone, the Holy

Spirit would be present with them and give them strength. That same Holy Spirit is present with us today and continues to give us strength and to guide us as we face all that life brings our way.

The disciples became bold and spoke truth to power. They traveled all over preaching and teaching and sharing what they had come to know and what had made a difference in their lives. For us, this same Holy Spirit helps us face long days of isolation or fearful days of going to work in places that threaten our health or the health of others. This same Holy Spirit helps us face the news from the Doctor, the layoff notice, the days when we are tired of being with the same people all the time and want a break or the days when we yearn to be with someone in person, someone with skin on.

This same Holy Spirit can guide us with words to say when someone else is spouting words that we think are just crazy, or untrue. The Spirit helps us listen when someone needs to talk, gives us words to say when we they are needed, and helps us keep silent when that is most important. The Holy Spirit can guide us to the places where we need to speak out about injustice or the need for reform.

At Ascension, the disciples received their commission, their marching orders, if you will, to go out and share the good news in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. We receive that same commission, those same marching orders.

Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria are more than just names of places far away from us. They are a guide to us about where we are to share and interact. For the disciples Jerusalem was the town where they lived, the people who were like them; the people they interacted with on a regular basis. Think about who makes up your Jerusalem. Who are the people

you see regularly, or interact with normally, or feel comfortable with?

These are the people who see how you live out your life on a regular basis – and how you live your faith.

Judea was a little bit further away. The people of Jerusalem and Judea might have still been very similar in many ways, but probably didn't know each other well. These are the people who are mostly like us but maybe a little bit different.

But Samaria is a different story. Samaritans and Jews did not speak to or associate with each other. And yet, Jesus was telling them to go and be a witness for Christ even in those places. Think about the places where you really don't want to be, the places you might never have thought about before. These are some of the places where we are still called to be witnesses to Christ as we have come to know him.

For most of us that may be through supporting agencies that are doing important work in those places. It may mean providing food, or clothing or financial support. For all of us, this likely means realizing, in ways that we never did before, how much we are connected with others throughout the world. We now understand that a virus very far away from us can quickly become very close to us, even entering our own homes. We are now understanding that what one government decides to do can, and does, affect people all over the world.

Rev. Cameron Trimble, the author of *Piloting Faith*, an email devotional wrote on April 15th. "We all have a lot of questions about the future emerging before us. That generates fear for most of us. Some of us are paralyzed by that fear; others are energized. It's those who are energized who will lead us forward."

She continued, “We now stand at an evolutionary tipping point. We must remember that we are not disappearing; we are becoming. Our reality is not worse because of this crisis; our reality is being revealed. It’s showing us what has been true and broken all along. Now we have the chance to ponder together, ‘What kind of world do we wish to see on the other side of resurrection?’ I hope our newly resurrected world holds one deep truth at its core: We are all in this together.”ⁱⁱ

My prayer is that as we think about what our faith means, and how we live it out, we will realize that being followers of Christ means that we really do care what happens to people we have never met. More than at probably any other time, we are starting to realize that we are truly part of a global society and we need to find ways to work together.

That may sound a little strange when what we have been doing is staying as far away from other people as possible and when some of us have been in our homes for weeks, going very long periods of time without seeing another person. But we are learning that isolating has been not only to protect ourselves, but also to protect and keep others safe.

During these difficult times, Ascension reminds us that God’s Spirit can, and does, use ordinary people just like you and me to spread God’s love to others. God’s spirit uses us in ways we cannot even begin to imagine. The Disciples were still looking for Jesus to establish an earthly kingdom, but what God gave them was something far greater.

The power of the Holy Spirit would help them do things they could not even imagine. We cannot imagine what things are going to look like on the other side of Covid-19. Some even wonder if there will be a post Covid-19 time, but I believe that whatever is happening, and whatever will happen, God can use it to do amazing things in this world. If we are willing, God

can and will use us to change the world in ways that bring us together so that love can be the rule of the world in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and even to the ends of the earth.

Let us pray:

O God of love, you have called us and continue to call us to be open to your leading each and every day. You promise us the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may do what we are not able to do by ourselves. Help us to stay rooted and grounded in you, filled with your love, and growing even more in your love so that we may share that love and bear fruit in the world. Amen.

ⁱ Reported by “Deadline.com” during President Trump’s visit to Ford plant producing in Michigan that was converted to produce ventilators. May 21, 2020

ⁱⁱ Trimble, Cameron. “Piloting Faith: One Deep Truth” April 15, 2020