

May 29, 2022. Rev. Kathryn McGinnis

Let us pray. O God, as we fully experience the good news of Easter and look toward the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, open our hearts and minds to your Word dwelling within us, calling us to unity in Christ. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 24, verses 44 through 53. Listen now for the word of the lord.

44 Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” **45** Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, **46** and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day **47** and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. **48** You are witnesses of these things. **49** And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” **50** Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. **51** While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. **52** And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, **53** and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

The word of the lord. **Thanks be to God.**

My heart is heavy today. It has been heavy this week. I think yours is too. Our hearts are heavy from holding the unbelievable, unfathomable reality, that 19, hear that number - 19 - elementary school children and two teachers were violently murdered by an 18 year old with an assault rifle in Texas on Tuesday. Murdered in their classroom.

It is a reality that feels unbelievable, unfathomable - but is actually all too believable. It's a narrative we go through again and again. For this shooting marks the 27th school shooting just in the year 2022. Already 27.

Not to mention the recent shooting at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, and at a taiwanese congregation who nests in a PCUSA church in southern California.

And I've tried to hold it all, seen others try to hold it all, seen the outcry, seen the heartbreak, seen the families and kids holding that all and bringing it to our scripture for today. I feel a little lost.

For in our scripture today, Christ leaves them. He blesses his disciples and is carried up into heaven. He leaves them.

And right now... in this moment, in this week... maybe it's okay to admit it feels like he has left us, too. Left us right when we needed him.

What do we do? How do we move forward? We need Christ.

Today is the last Sunday of the Easter season. The season of resurrection. And today we celebrate the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ into heaven. On this day, the church gives thanks for Christ's sovereign rule over all the earth, as well as his priestly intercession for us at the throne of mercy.

Our scripture for today is Luke's account of the ascension. The resurrected Christ appears to his disciples for the last time. He eats with them, breaks bread with them, - and our scripture begins at that dinner where he then speaks to them, charges them to go out and bear witness, tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit, and then he is carried up into Heaven. And then Luke's Gospel ends.

As I've read this passage, over and over, I'm rather struck by the disciples in this passage. So often, all too often, the disciples get it wrong.

In every gospel, they mess up again and again, they don't understand Christ or believe him and you get so frustrated with them. But here, here of all places, they seem to get it right.

Now they do seem to understand, finally, what Christ is telling them. Or if they do not understand, they choose to believe, they have faith. They listen, and do as they're told, and worship him with great joy, waiting for the holy spirit to come.

But we don't actually know what they are thinking. They aren't given a voice here.

When Christ appears to them for the last time they still do not recognize him. They still are afraid. They still have doubts.

It's not until Jesus breaks bread with them, that the disciples recognize him, the resurrected Christ, for the last time.

THEN they listen as Christ begins to speak, they believe, do as they're told, and wait in joy.

But as we're sitting here together this morning, heartbroken and in disbelief, begging for Christ...I can't help but wonder what the disciples really thought as they saw the resurrected Christ for the last time.

What they thought as he broke bread and began to speak. What they might have said, if their voices were told here.

I wonder what was going on in their lives... were they, too, secretly or silently or maybe even openly begging Christ to stay? Were their hearts heavy too, with the violence of humanity?

Christ was leaving them in a world that outwardly still looked the same. Christ didn't overthrow the Roman Empire and reinstate Israel and its monarchy as they thought the Messiah would. Ending their troubles. Their world was still occupied by Rome.

They still lived their lives under Roman oppression and all the hardships and unjust realities of day to day life that came with it.

And they were now likely going through the trauma of watching their friend and Lord die, going through the trauma of betraying him, and the trauma of over and over still not recognizing him. And now he was leaving.

What do they do? How do they move forward? They need Christ.

Christ ascending into heaven marks a critical hinge-point in God's mission of restoring a broken world through Christ.

His ascension both completes Jesus' earthly saving ministry and commences an expanded phase of that mission to all nations through his Spirit-infused followers.

And there at that dinner - as he's speaking with his disciples telling them he's leaving, they likely were scared and worried. Maybe feeling a little lost.

He tells them everything. Christ tells them what he has done, why he has done it, and what they now must do. To explain it all, Christ turns back to the past.

To the tradition of Israel.

He tells them his ministry, his life, his death, his resurrection - it fulfills the Hebrew scripture. Written in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms.

Throughout his life Jesus sought not only to explain, but also to exhibit, to incarnate, to live out, to fill full/fill out/ fill up the Jewish scriptures in his experience, reminding them of 'everything written about me.'

And he does this to remind them, the disciples, his followers, that these scriptures are really not a thing in the past.

As Christ ascends to heaven we can turn back to these scriptures and see him alive and breathing through them.

As Belton Joyner writes, "Tradition becomes a feeding tube by which God's work in days long ago is delivered to our own time. Old is good. The law of Moses tells how God wants God's people to live. The prophets alert God's people to ways in which God's people miss the mark. The psalms share the fullness of the feeling of God's people, whether in praise, lament, confusion, doubt or hope."

Or, rather simply put, we're not the first to encounter the living God.

And when we draw on tradition, we ask those who walked the mountain before us to let us know where the rocks are, where the fresh streams are, and where the dangerous animals hide.

I've spent a lot of time walking the trails on mountains - following the paths laid out for me.

One of the reasons I think hiking trails in the mountains is such a holy experience is because the birth of God's people came from blazing a new trail through the wilderness to the promise land. It was during those 40 years in the wilderness, after God had rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and was now guiding them to the promise land. It was there that God cut a covenant with the Israelites, and they became God's people.

But the way had not been paved for them. As they were walking through the wilderness, blazing a new trail, so too were they trying to figure out what it meant to be God's own. What it meant to be God's people and how to live their lives accordingly.

Today when I walk those trails in the mountains, I am reminded of the gift of the trail itself. The gift of having the way paved for me.

The gift of history to look back and see what it means to be God's own.

The Israelites endured heartbreak after heartbreak, tragedy after tragedy, yet their faith endured. They always found their way back to God. They found the path again.

It's there that Christ tells us we find him alive. It's there that Christ calls us to look and see where his ministry has been fulfilled. Fulfilled so we might bear witness, see the path to go forward and preach repentance and forgiveness of sins.

In the newsletter this week, I shared the statement that PC(USA) released after the shooting in Texas. The statement reads: "Like Jesus, many people are weeping. Our hearts break as another person killed several people including a teacher and children in Uvalde, TX. And this pandemic of violent people with guns impacts us all. Jesus wept, he cried. He took time to sit with his grief. We must sit in the sorrow long enough to feel it and to lament it to the point that it compels us to stand up in the morning, and take the steps needed to help change and heal our world."

So too, in Jesus' ascension, Jesus charges his disciples to then wait. Before they go out and bear witness they must first wait for the power of the holy spirit. The power that will sustain them in this journey.

There is power in waiting. In just stopping, and feeling it all.

When the disciples did this, they did so joyously, and worshipping continually. But I imagine they were still afraid and unsure of what would come next.

Perhaps they were able to wait joyously because they looked back in those holy scripture, and they saw the trail ahead already paved them, they saw Christ there.

They heard the words God spoke to Joshua, "I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you." And they knew Christ was speaking those words to them too. And the holy spirit did come. She came and empowered them to walk that trail laid out for them.

As we wait today - as we have received Christ's blessings and watched him ascend into heaven - we now wait. And it is okay to do so in sorrow and lament. It is okay to not feel joy, only sadness.

But know this: the wait will end. For we have the gift of being able to look back and see that the holy spirit comes time and time again. And she will come to us. She will meet us where we are. And she will empower us to go forth: to have the courage to take the steps to boldly take the trail paved before us. A trail that changes and heals our world in the name of Christ's gospel of redemption and forgiveness.

A world where children don't die in their classroom. A world where they are protected from senseless violence. And it's in this gift, this charge, it's there we find joy.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.