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Emanuel's Ev. Lutheran Church • Bellevue (Pittsburgh), PA
June 5, 2011 • Seventh Sunday after Easter (A)

Acts 1:6-14
1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11
John 17:1-11

Jesus' disciples had to be a confused mess. They had watched their teacher, friend, and Lord suffer and die. It had to have opened up: their grief, their unforgiven hurts, their recollection of joys from the past, their regrets and shame.

Then, all of a sudden, he was alive! In this Easter season, we heard story after story of the disciples encountering the risen Christ. With each one, they seemed to "get" just a bit more. They "got" that he was alive once again – and that he was the same person, with healed wounds to show and all. They "got" that this was a big deal – that somehow this changed everything... though they probably didn't understand fully why.

In today's first lesson, from *The Acts of the Apostles*, we hear one of their lingering questions. The disciples asked, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (*Acts 6:6*) His teachings and miracles were about salvation for Israel, right? Just like Moses, when he brought the Israelites out of slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. They were certain that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the one who would set them free from their oppressors, the Roman Empire. The disciples understood all these things – and they looked forward to them with hope. So they just wanted to know when. Is it now? (*pause*) How 'bout now?

This question of “When?” is obviously one that humans are still asking, and longing for. People like Harold Camping are trying to peer into the future and to pin down God’s plan.

Like so many of Jesus’ responses, his answer to this question confused the disciples again. “He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.’” (*Acts 1:7*) It’s exactly the kind of cop-out answer that probably drove them crazy about him. But then Jesus shifted their focus, as he so often did. He spoke a promise to these followers, who were still recovering from the drama and trauma of all that had happened.



Jesus says that the question to answer is not “when?” so much as “what?” What is going to happen next? And what shall we do?

Jesus answered these “what” questions before they were even articulated. He said, “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.” (*Acts 1:8*) Jesus didn’t look to the “end” of anything. He didn’t tell them about the end of imperial rule – or the end of the world, for that matter. Instead Jesus looked toward a new beginning, of God being powerfully present with them in a different way, and of the vocation that Jesus would ask of them. They would be witnesses, there at home, in Jerusalem, and “to the ends of the earth.”



We know the drama of our Christian faith lives. We know the grief of saying goodbye to people who we care deeply about, or those who have shared God's grace with us. I feel like I'm swimming in an ocean of that grief today. We know the longing to experience justice and peace and the life God imagines for us all, and the desire for that to come sooner rather than later. We feel the frustration of seeing the sin and brokenness of our world and of ourselves. These are some of the very brokenness that stands against the flourishing of Christ's church, wherever it is found, and the spreading of God's grace in people's lives. There are times like this, when our church or our faith seem to be changing faster than we would like. We simply can't peer into the future to see what is ahead for each of us, or for Emanuel's church family.

Amid all our frustrations – with change, with the church, with our culture – Jesus points us to look in the right direction. Not backwards, into the past. Not up at God, wondering what's going on. Jesus, and the two men in white, remind us to pay attention to what's happening right here, among us. Jesus told the disciples to expect the Holy Spirit, the one whom we already know is with us. Next week the church celebrates Pentecost, and the coming of the Holy Spirit to those first apostles. She dwells here with us and in our world. She works among us, bearing God's powerful presence to our brokenness, bringing gospel beauty to our relationships and world. This is the Holy Spirit, who has been guiding and encouraging

our congregation, helping us to grow spiritually as we discussed the future of our church. This is the Holy Spirit, who was already at working, preparing new possibilities for Emanuel's to consider, the same week as my resignation.



There is a second part to the promise that Jesus proclaimed to the disciples. "... [Y]ou will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (*Acts 1:8*) He promised, or predicted, how the disciples would carry on Jesus' ministry after he ascended. They had a particular role to play in sharing the kingdom of God, the grace and the love of Jesus, with the world. This passage similarly reminds us of our call as Jesus' followers, to witness to Christ's love and life. There are no boundaries for how that happens – no building walls, no days of the week, no hours in the day, no relationships that are off-limits.

This week, our presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Mark Hanson, sent a letter to pastors and other rostered leaders. I'd like to share part of that with you:



“June 2, 2011

‘We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed.’ (*2 Corinthians 4:8-9*)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

“Our hearts have been breaking for weeks as we have watched incessant storms devastate many parts of the United States. From the plains of North Dakota to the bayous of Louisiana, floodwaters and torrential rain have washed out communities and cropland. Destructive tornado strikes leveled homes for miles in cities and towns including Joplin, Mo., and Cullman, Ala. Two ELCA church buildings -- one in each state -- were destroyed.

“The winds destroyed the building of Peace Lutheran Church in Joplin, but not the faith of its members. Last Sunday they gathered in the parking lot in the midst of debris and shattered hopes to worship in the strong name of the risen Christ.

“In the aftermath of storms that seem relentless, we may feel overwhelmed and anxious, but not powerless. For God’s promise is clear: nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Trusting in God’s promise and the power of the Holy Spirit, we respond by joining together in God’s work of restoring community. The liberating power of the gospel frees us to repair roofs in Cullman and fill sandbags in Fargo, on behalf of people we don’t know and may never meet.”

The Bishop’s letter then continues to name some of the practices that we Lutherans rely upon, as we care for our neighbors. “We will pray,” just as the disciples did at the end of our Acts reading. “We will stand

together... We will give generously... We will stay until the work is done... And we will witness to our living faith in Christ Jesus as we join together to do God's work with our hands.”



In his letter, Bishop Hanson described our Lutheran response to the suffering of our neighbors – and they are great examples of what Jesus is talking about. In these kinds of practices, we are witnesses to the God revealed in Christ, to the faith that we live. We are witnesses, when we trust God and allow the Holy Spirit to guide our actions, sharing forgiveness and generosity, humility and gratitude. We are witnesses to the faith of Christ, in times of stability or change, plenty or want, welcome or farewell, disappointment or joy, mourning or celebration. The only way that we can do any of these things is by the power of the Holy Spirit, who fills us with the love of Christ Jesus, all the days of our lives. We are witnesses because we have been welcomed, and blessed, and loved.

In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.