5-24-20 online Faith Grounded in Prayer Rev. Amy Haines

Acts 1:6-14 Ascension Day

It’s been 11 weeks since we last worshipped together in person. This past Thursday marked 40 days since we celebrated Easter together online. One week from tomorrow is June 1st already!

I used to scoff when people would say, the older you get, the faster time flies. Then I blink, and realize the age of my children. I blink, and realize how many decades ago this weekend I graduated from Franklin High School. I blink, and realize I’m closer now to retirement than ordination.

This weekend, we come to the end of the Easter season.

For the past 6 weeks we have journeyed with the first disciples of Jesus as they struggled to make sense of all they had seen and heard and experienced. Strange words at the Passover table. An arrest in the garden. Fleeing in fear. Jesus’ death on a cross. Their agony and grief.

An empty tomb as good news. A resurrected Christ.

For the past 6 weeks we’ve been reminded that faith in a crucified and risen Savior was not an overnight conviction for them, but a slow growing conviction that resurrection is good news.

Death has been defeated. Hope is alive. Like any other season numbering 40 in the Scriptures,

the 40 days of Easter has been a time of preparation. For the first disciples, it was a time to embrace the good news of resurrection, and learn anew what Jesus meant when he said his ministry was to bring the kingdom of God to earth. For us here today, in the midst of a global pandemic, these 40 days have encouraged us to have the faith to follow Jesus, crucified and risen, even when we’re afraid, when we doubt, when we can’t see, when we’re tired, and when we’re not physically together.

This weekend, we come to the end of the Easter season.

Yet as one season ends, another one begins. Next week we move into the season of Pentecost.

We move from learning about the faith to follow Jesus to living out our faith in Jesus.

Today’s Scripture continues the story of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances.

For 40 days, Jesus had been appearing to various disciples such as Thomas and Cleopas and Peter. We’ve heard their stories over the past few weeks. Yet Jesus had also been appearing to larger groups of disciples, as they sought to support one another into a new way of believing and thinking and living.

Now Jesus was offering his final words of wisdom before he returned to his heavenly home,

so that his ministry could expand beyond one person to the world. In this graduation season,

what words of wisdom would you like to hear today?

In 2007 Journalist David Brooks told Wake Forest grads:

“You know that uncertainty you feel today? It never goes away. The question is, do you know how to make uncertainty your friend?”

In 2010 Margaret Spellings, former Secretary of Education, told Princeton grads:

“Keep learning because you just never know what life has in store for you next.”

Then in 2008 author JK Rowling told Harvard grads:

“The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won, and it has been worth more than any qualification I ever earned.”

--unknown sources

Those are words of wisdom that can still be applicable today for the class of 2020, and for each and every one of us. Those are also words of wisdom that would have applied to the first disciples of Jesus.

For even after journeying with Jesus for three years, even after learning from him in the 40 days since his resurrection, they still struggled with uncertainty and knew that adversity was ahead of them. They still struggled to understand the scope of Jesus’ ministry.

They had been so engrained to think about the restoration of the nation of Israel, that they still missed that God’s intention is the restoration of all creation.

They asked Jesus, “When will **you** restore the kingdom of Israel?”

Jesus basically ignored their question by responding, “That’s not for you to know. What you need to know is that **you** will be given power to be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.”

Notice that Jesus is not saying they *might* be witnesses; neither is Jesus *begging* them to be witnesses. Rather, Jesus is emphatically stating that these ordinary men and women who were his first disciples, these same ones who deserted him and denied him at his time of trial,

they **will be** his witnesses through the power of the Holy Spirit. Even though many of these men and women are from rural Galilee, they will be witnesses to Jesus and God’s good news in the city of Jerusalem, in the regions of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

That same commission is ours today. As followers of Jesus, how are we witnessing to Jesus

in our homes, our city, our state and our world? When we follow Jesus, we are to live for him wherever we find ourselves. In relationships with family, friends and stranger; in the digital world as well as the physical world; together in community and in our daily lives.

We are to be witnesses through proclaiming our stories of Jesus’ presence in our lives. We are to be witnesses through sharing God’s love in our words and actions. We are to be witnesses to the ways Jesus has transformed our lives as a way to invite others to be transformed by Jesus. Again, Jesus is not looking for just the restoration of Israel, but the restoration of all creation

to God’s ways of justice and mercy, of hope and love, of compassion and redemption.

We are here today because of the witness of those who have gone before us. This Memorial Day weekend, we remember those who sacrificed their lives to save others during military service. This Aldersgate Sunday we remember John Wesley who experienced the assurance of salvation as a gift of God, not the result of good works, and taught those Methodists who met with him the never-ending grace of God. This weekend we can give thanks for those who witnessed to Jesus’ love when they founded churches in the village of Springboro in the 1800s.

This weekend we can give thanks for those who have been examples of faithfulness in our lives,

living witnesses to God’s redeeming love and grace.

This weekend we can give thanks for the faith of the first followers of Jesus, whose witness truly began when Jesus ascended to heaven. Scripture proclaims that 40 days after Easter,

Jesus was lifted up, out of sight, into the presence of God. Or, as our creeds all proclaim,

“He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

Imagine for a moment the disciples looking up as Jesus was lifted up, like spectators at Cape Canaveral watching the liftoff of rockets and shuttles into space. They had watched him die, and their hopes died with him. No one saw him rise from the dead, yet they experienced his presence with them, resurrected, alive. Now they watched Jesus ascend to his home in heaven.

While they were staring, in awe of what had just happened, two men in white robes, presumably two of God’s angels, appeared and said, “Why do you stand there looking up?

He has been taken up. He will one day return the same way. Yet now is the time to stop looking up and start looking out.”

OK, the angels didn’t say all of that, but that’s what I hear them saying. “He’s gone. Again. Gone home. Yet one day he will come again. Now what? Now what are you going to do in the meantime, as his followers and witnesses? How are you now going to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom ways in this world?”

Thankfully, the disciples didn’t scatter when Jesus was ascended, unlike their actions on that first Easter day. Instead, they remained together. They returned to Jerusalem, to wait and pray and prepare for what was to come. They knew that Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit. They just didn’t know yet how the Spirit would change their lives! That is next week’s story.

One verse after today’s passage, in Acts 1:15, the crowd in that upper room was numbered at 120 men and women. Imagine! An entire community together, waiting, praying, preparing for what was still to come.

Many in that community are named, to remind the early church of their unity to follow Christ.

The eleven remaining disciples are named. Jesus’ mother and brothers are named. Women are mentioned. By naming a few of those present in that upper room, we are reminded that Jesus was truly ushering in a new way of being. Where all would be welcomed. All would be witnesses. All would be redeemed.

Together, these men and women witness to us today of a faith grounded in prayer. They didn’t immediately go out after Jesus’ ascension to proclaim good news to the world. They didn’t immediately try to plan for the next new phase of ministry. Instead, they waited. And prayed.

Together.

That time of waiting could not have been easy. Ten days. Ten long days between Jesus’ ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. How many of us cannot even wait 10 seconds for the microwave to finish? They waited 10 days, together, and spent that time being strengthened for the journey ahead through prayer.

They had seen Jesus’ regular habit of prayer, taking time away from the crowds to converse with God. Many of them knew the power of prayer, power that gave them strength for the journey, and drew them closer to one another as they drew closer to God.

As we await our next steps forward as a community of faith, as we await the outline of expectations for when we can gather again in person, may we follow the example of the disciples. May we trust that God is still with us, and be reminded that we are still the church, the body of Christ in the world today.

May this be a time of active waiting, a time that prepares us to witness to the world around us in a new way.

May this also time be a time to reflect on our current witness. Does our current witness honor the footsteps of those we follow and remember this weekend? Is our current witness showing service to others? Is our current witness showing an assurance that God is still with us? Is our current witness showing a community grounded in prayer? How can our current witness better reflect the Savior we follow?

May this also be a time grounded in prayer. May we continue to pray for one another, for our community, for our world. May we continue to pray for God’s guidance and strength, God’s vision and comfort.

No matter how many more weeks we are physically apart, we are still the church, the body of Christ, followers of Jesus sent forth to witness to Jesus’ presence with us.

We are not abandoned, but empowered. For Christ is still with us, through the power of the Holy Spirit. May we have faith to follow where Jesus leads us, faith to be Jesus’ witnesses,

and faith to be shaped by prayer.

May it be so. Let us pray.