

Seventh Sunday of Easter May 24, 2020

Acts 1:6-14

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Alleluia! Jesus is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Please indulge me. You see, this is the last week that we get to say this Easter phrase during worship. Alleluia! Jesus is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

For those unaware, Easter is more than just a one-day holiday that happens in the Springtime. It's an entire season. A season lasting seven weeks. A week of weeks, some call it. And this is the seventh and final week of this Easter Season. That means next Sunday is the holy day of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, when the Holy Spirit blows upon the apostles and sends them out into the world empowered with new mission.

But before next Sunday, we're still in Easter. And today is the Sunday we remember Jesus returning to heaven after spending 40 days with his friends following his resurrection. This Sunday is often called Ascension Sunday.

Now, I've never been much of a music person. Growing up, it seemed the people I knew defined themselves by the music they listened to. In high school, there were the "kickers"—those who listened to country western music. There were the ones who identified with grunge music, and those who listened to pop, and those who liked rap.

Me? I was more of a talk-radio-kind-of guy (even in high school). It isn't that I don't like music; it's that I can enjoy music from a wide variety of genres, and no one music genre really defines me.

What about you. What kind of music do you typically listen to? Which types of music make you tap your feet and sing along, and what kind of music makes you want to cover your ears in disgust?

I will say that while I was growing up my parents loved to listen to the Beatles. And so, like millions of others around the world, I have an affinity for many of their songs. As I was reading Chapter 1 of Acts to prepare for today's sermon, I started thinking of the Beatles song *Hello, Goodbye*. The one that goes, "*You say goodbye, I say hello. I don't know why you say goodbye, I say hello.*"

This song makes me reflect on how life is filled with "hellos" and "goodbyes." Think about it. Think about all the special hellos in your life: When you said hello to your child for the first time the day they were born or adopted; When you first laid eyes on the love of your life; When you met your best friend for the first time; When you greeted your beloved pet for the first time. Some hellos are holy and special, and they're ones we'll always remember.

And it's the same with some goodbyes. Think about the holy, special goodbyes in your life. Some may have had good feelings associated with them: Saying goodbye to your car loan or mortgage after making your final payment; Saying goodbye to the doctors and nurses as you leave the hospital after recovering from a long illness.

However, some goodbyes are holy and significant, but evoke painful feelings. For example, saying goodbye to a loved one who is near death; or saying goodbye to a marriage that you worked at for so long, but were unable to salvage; Or having to say goodbye to your home of 50 years as you move into an assisted living facility.

Life is full of hellos and goodbyes, many that are dull and unimportant, but some that are life-changing and significant.

I think we sometimes forget that the disciples never had an opportunity to say goodbye to Jesus before his death on a cross. Everything fell apart so fast during Holy Week. And after he was arrested, tried, tortured, and when his execution was imminent, they all scattered in fear. There was no chance for a goodbye.

So it seems to me that their profound joy in encountering the risen Jesus makes sense. Because it meant even their fears, their denials, their failures could not undo the relationship that Christ had chosen to establish with them. And as we learn from the verses before and through today's reading from Acts, the apostles get 40 days with Jesus, getting to break bread with him, and to talk with him about the Kingdom of God. And Jesus gives them instructions to prepare them for the gift that God would be sending in the form of the Holy Spirit.

He tells them that they are going to receive power from on high, and that this power will make them witnesses of him and his resurrection. And this power will propel them into the world to proclaim Good News. And at that, Jesus takes his leave to return to God the Father.

Think about it. This was a profoundly good and holy goodbye, one that healed and made up for all the pain that came from his crucifixion and death. And it could be tempting to join the disciples in standing and staring into the skies... to stand around, waiting for something (anything) to happen.

But, in today's reading, as the disciples stand staring up at the sky, we are told that two angels—two people wearing white—suddenly stand beside them asking them that all-important question: “Why are you just standing around staring at the sky?”

The Ascension of Jesus is a special thing to celebrate. But it is not a time intended to leave us standing around and staring at the skies, doing nothing.

I wonder if we the Church today also sometimes catch ourselves standing around staring up at the skies, perhaps waiting for Jesus to come back, for him to come and fix “all the things.” Because there still seems to be a lot of broken things in the world... Racism, sexism, homophobia... Disease, war and gun violence in our schools... Anxiety, addictions, a restless sense of meaninglessness... I think we often stand around staring into heaven, waiting for Jesus to come back because the world still seems like a big old mess that only Jesus can fix.

But the Ascension of Jesus gives us a **Mission** and a **Promise**. The Mission is that we now have work to do. Jesus’ ascension transforms us from mere observers to active co-workers in Christ’s mission. It changes us from people who only receive from Jesus, to those who now have been equipped, empowered and sent to go and serve others.

The Promise is that we’re not left alone to do this work by ourselves! Next Sunday, we will celebrate the great Feast of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit was unleashed upon the Church, giving us the power to do what we’ve been called to do in Jesus’ name. But don’t think Pentecost is only something we celebrate in worship, because that power from on high, that gift of the Holy Spirit is the power that is poured out upon us in the waters of baptism. Those of us who have been baptism are already empowered to be the witnesses Jesus calls us to be, and that power is renewed in us each and every day.

Dear friends in Christ, today, this Ascension Sunday, we are challenged to not just stand around staring up at the sky... We’ve got work to do! Especially these days, the work is new, and scary, and different as we learn how to be the Church in the age of COVID-19. But the good news is that we have a Mission and a Promise from Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit has already been poured out upon us.

On this Ascension Sunday, we say goodbye to Jesus as he physically leaves earth, but as we also say hello to the presence of Jesus as the Church becomes the Body of Christ in the world for the sake of the world. And that, my friends, is good news.

Alleluia! Jesus is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! And Amen.