

Rollstone Congregational Church
Fitchburg, MA

Sixth Sunday after Easter

May 24, 2020

Prelude: *Adagio* from Organ Sonata in F Major Op. 65 **Felix Mendelssohn**

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters as we begin preparations to permit our worship services to be open to you and the public, we ask that you be respectful for the task that has been placed upon the church leadership. We are moving as quickly as we can safely move to obtaining that objective, but we must be considerate of complying with ALL regulations and protocols. This task will not happen overnight and we ask that you be patient until we can safely allow for a gathering of the church in our church building. It is our objective to comply with the guidance provided by the governmental agencies and other resources while keeping each of you safe. We have endured and we will be continue to be okay because God has provided to us strength and reassurance. Don't forget to send in your prayer requests so that they may be added to the prayer list of Joys and Concerns.

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

We worship the God who inhabits our world and indwells our lives.
We need not look up to find God; we need only to look around:

- within ourselves,
- beyond ourselves,
- into the eyes of another.
-

We need not listen for a distant thunder to find God; we need only listen to:

- the music of life,
- the words of children,
- the questions of the curious,
- the rhythm of a heartbeat.
-

We worship the God who inhabits our world and who indwells our lives.

Opening Hymn:**“Come, Christians, Join to Sing”**

Come, Christians, join to sing: Alleluia! Amen!
loud praise to Christ our King; Alleluia! Amen!
let all, with heart and voice, before his throne rejoice;
praise is his gracious choice. Alleluia! Amen!

Come, lift your hearts on high, Alleluia! Amen!
let praises fill the sky; Alleluia! Amen!
he is our Guide and Friend; to us he'll condescend;
his love shall never end. Alleluia! Amen!

Praise yet our Christ again, Alleluia! Amen!
life shall not end the strain; Alleluia! Amen!
on heaven's blissful shore, his goodness we'll adore,
singing forevermore, "Alleluia! Amen!"

A Time of Prayer:

Lord Jesus, it would be delightful to spend our days gazing after you into the heavens, trying to peer beyond the mystery to understand where you have gone and when you will return. Instead, it is time for us to be very down to earth, time to be about the mission you have entrusted to us. Prepare us with your Spirit's precious gifts, that through us our neighbors may experience your love. Equip our fellowship with strong muscles, tough minds and glad hearts which delight in serving people in need. Bless us with vision, that we may discover creative ways to extend your compassion to every land, so that when you return, it will be to a people prepared. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:**Acts 1:6-14 (NIV)**

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ 7He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But 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.’ 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

The Message: The 3 W's: "Word – Waiting - Witnessing"

On top of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem is a very small Crusader-era church called "The Chapel of the Ascension."

Unlike the popular and crowded Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which marks the site of Jesus' crucifixion and burial, this little chapel sees few visitors. Administered by Muslims since the end of the Crusades, the chapel marks the traditional site of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Muslims believed that Jesus was a prophet, so they maintain the site and allow Christian pilgrims to see what's inside.

And what's inside is a small area that — according to tradition — reveals the footprints of Jesus — the place where he stood before he was taken up into heaven. Pilgrims in the medieval period would take home dust from this little spot as relics of their Holy Land visit but, like the pieces of the "true cross," if you took all that sacred dust and put it together, Jesus' footprint would be about size 500.

The chapel is often not on the main tour route for visitors to the Holy Land today. Maybe that's because the ascension of Jesus has been a downplayed story in many Christian churches.

Yet, the Ascension is vitally important to our understanding of the story of Jesus and the church. Forty days after Jesus' resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples what they are to do next. There on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gives his disciples a strategy for implementing the resurrection life of the new creation in the present. He has spent three years instructing and training them for this moment, and now, as he ascends to take his royal place with the Father, he commissions his disciples to carry on his work until he returns to bring it to completion.

So, how does that movement unfold, and what's our part in it?

Three key components in the text reveal how individuals and churches are to be part of the transformational movement that Jesus is launching in the world: word, waiting and witnessing.

First, word. In verses 1-3, Luke gives us a synopsis of what Jesus "did and taught" in the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension. Forty is an important number in the Bible because it's a number of preparation. Noah was in the ark 40 days; Israel was in the desert 40 years; Jesus was tempted for 40 days. All are precursors to a new beginning. In the 40 days between Easter and Ascension, Jesus was preparing his disciples for their new mission, both by teaching them about the kingdom of God and by giving them "convincing proofs" that he was, indeed, raised from the dead.

Even after three years of teaching, Jesus spends 40 more days instructing his disciples. Before he leaves them and before they go charging off into the world, Jesus wants them to wait and make sure they have read all the directions.

And what were those directions?

Luke tells us.

At the end of his gospel, he says that Jesus' primary instruction to the disciples was grounded in Scripture. "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” (Luke 24:44). Jesus uses the whole story of Scripture to place his ministry, death and resurrection into context. Whatever we believe and whatever we do must be grounded in that word.

If we’re going to follow Jesus, that is, be people who announce the presence of the kingdom of God, then we have to be willing to be students of Scripture, and also be immersed in it every day as Jesus was. Daily reading and regular study with others anchors our sense of mission.

This immersion in the word leads to the second task we need to embrace as Jesus’ people: waiting.

In verse 4, Jesus orders his disciples not to go rushing off into the world with their newfound knowledge, but, rather, they are to “wait there for the promise of the Father” and the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Waiting isn’t something that we humans tend to do well. The disciples were no exception. Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem for God to give them his promised empowering Spirit, but the disciples respond by asking an impatient question, much like kids when they ask, “Are we there yet?” “Yeah, yeah, but Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (v. 6).

They are right, of course, in connecting Jesus’ resurrection with the restoration of the whole world through the promise to Israel. This is what the Scriptures are about, after all, and Jesus has instructed them as such.

But they misunderstand that this promise of restoration needs to be proclaimed throughout the world. They will not merely be bystanders to this project, but rather the ones who will help to bring it to reality. This is the work that Jesus has been doing all along, and now it will be their work. It will not be an easy task, and they will not be able to do it on their own.

Jesus did not choose these disciples because they were the best and brightest and most capable people. He chose them, as God often chooses people, because God’s power can be revealed through them. They had no power of their own, only the power that God would give them. And that power will come through the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit coming upon them.

Biblically speaking, “waiting upon the Lord” is not a passive activity, but an active one. We actively seek God’s presence and we await it anxiously with anticipation. Jesus tells his disciples that they need to wait for the Spirit’s power. They do so not by sitting around wondering when the Spirit will come, but rather by constantly devoting themselves to prayer (v. 14).

Notice also that they don’t wait as individuals who are hoping for a personal spiritual experience, but rather as a community. When the Spirit comes, they are “all together in one place” (2:1).

Besides a biblical illiteracy, one of the major problems in the church is a failure to wait upon the Lord, to wait upon the Spirit through prayer. The primary work of the church is done through the Spirit, and we wait on the Spirit in prayer. Apart from the Spirit, we are powerless. When we fail to wait in prayer, we will fail because we try to do everything under our own power.

Word and waiting then lead us to the third task: witnessing. Jesus tells the disciples that once the Spirit has come upon them and empowered them, they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (v. 8). This is really the thesis statement of the whole book of Acts because this is precisely what the disciples will do. But what does “witness” mean?

In the first-century world, when someone was enthroned as king or emperor, that new authority would take effect through heralds going off throughout the territory announcing the good news: “We have a

new king.” This was good news indeed because the arrival of a new king meant the restoration of order and not the chaos of anarchy. Imagine, for example, a new Roman emperor coming to power and heralds being sent as far as Britain and Spain and Egypt — literally to the ends of the empire — to announce the emperor’s enthronement.

That’s the image we get here. The disciples ask about the kingdom, when it will come about, and Jesus tells them that in one sense the kingdom is already here because the king has defeated his enemies (for Jesus, the enemy of sin and death) and is taking his place as God’s Messiah and the world’s righteous ruler.

And yet, his kingdom is not all the way here yet. The world is still not fully and visibly living under God’s just and healing rule. The kingdom is already here and not yet fully here, and disciples live in this in-between time. The disciples are to go out as heralds and proclaim that his kingdom is at hand.

And then Jesus gives them their travel agenda. They are to begin in Jerusalem, where Jesus had been crucified and where people were looking for them, too.

They were to go to Judea and Samaria (Samaria being Israel’s bitter enemy).

And they were to go to the ends of the earth, to a Roman Empire that already had a lord named Caesar and would not take kindly to the enthronement of a rival.

The disciples would bear good news, but it would be bad news to some. It’s no coincidence that the Greek word for witness and “martyr” is the same.

To be a witness for Jesus thus means a whole lot more than merely telling the story about how an individual gets to heaven, as it has sometimes been understood.

To be a witness is to proclaim and demonstrate Christ’s lordship in our own lives, tell those stories of forgiveness and transformation, and recall how God’s grace has made us new. Baptism marks us a people who have been transformed by God’s grace in Christ and his lordship over our lives. And when we ourselves have said yes to Jesus’ call to be witnesses, we then demonstrate what that looks like through our lifestyle, actions and love for the world that is God’s good creation.

It’s a witness that lifts the poor, eats with sinners, forgives sins, brings healing and demonstrates sacrificial love.

It’s a witness that is grounded in a Jesus-shaped vision of the world as God’s kingdom. It’s a witness that compels the world to ask: Who is your Lord?

Indeed, Jesus implies that his disciples will not only be his heralds and witnesses, but they will also continue his work. At the end of this passage, Jesus ascends in a “cloud,” leaving the disciples standing there gawking at the amazing sight (v. 9). In Scripture, a “cloud” is very often associated with the presence of God who guided the Israelites from Egypt in a pillar of cloud, met Moses in a cloud on Mount Sinai, and dwelt in a cloud in the tabernacle. Jesus thus ascends into God’s presence, which isn’t far from us and will return to us as promised. Heaven and earth are interlocking realities. Luke wants us to be reminded of that reality and that Jesus has not gone far and is still present in the Spirit, empowering the disciples to carry on the work.

But there’s another kind of reference here that Luke seems to be making. It goes back to the story of Elijah and Elisha in 2 Kings 2. Elijah the prophet, at the end of his life, ascends to heaven in a whirlwind (this after Elisha has asked for a double portion of his mentor’s spirit). Elisha sees Elijah go in this way and then picks up Elijah’s fallen mantle, his symbol of prophetic authority, and carries on Elijah’s work.

The ascension of Jesus acts in a similar way. Jesus is taken up, and we pick up his mantle to continue his work.

The lectionary passage ends with the disciples still staring at the sky (v. 11). A lot of Christians still do that, focusing all their attention on a heavenly destiny or waiting for the sky to fall like Chicken Little.

But the two angels who show up tell the disciples of Jesus that the sky isn't their destiny. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go" (v. 11). So now, they imply, pick up the mantle and go to work. Turn your gaze from the sky and toward the world that needs the message of the good news of the kingdom. Go and be witnesses.

When the Crusaders built that chapel on the Mount of Olives, it was originally open to the sky, but then they put a roof on it. Whether that was for theological or defensive reasons, we don't know. But there does seem to be a missional connection: the closed stone dome and the dark interior compels the pilgrim to go outside, where you see a panorama of Jerusalem before you. Word and waiting turn to witness.

May we be disciples of Jesus who no longer keep staring at the sky but keep looking out into the world and seeing every day as an opportunity to be a herald of the king in what we say and do.

Yes, Jesus will come back, but for now Jesus is still at work, and he chooses to do that work in us and through us.

Organ Interlude:

Magnificat

Unknown

A Time of Prayer – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
Linda Hurd
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud

**Cathie Perra
Maria Piazza
Melanie Pouliot
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Marilyn Wales
Family of Patty Westerman
All who are experiencing difficult times and situations
All who are lonely or depressed
All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus
All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders
Those whose livelihoods have been impacted through lost jobs or reduced financial stability
Our Church and all of its members**

God of Remembrance, we come before you to give thanks for the lives of those who have gone before us into your promised rest. There are beloved faces we no longer see, joyous laughs we no longer hear, loving arms whose embrace we miss terribly.

Comfort comes in knowing that you love these whom we remember far more than we. Peace comes through knowing that it is your nature always to have mercy. Acceptance comes by the knowledge that in your presence their joy abounds, as will ours, on the day we are reunited in your Presence.

Today, we give you thanks for lives well lived. Thank you for the inspiration they gave us. Thank you for teaching us about the world through their eyes. Thank you for speaking your wisdom through their words. Thank you for holding us with their arms. To this day their influence lives on in the way we speak, in the traditions we continue, in the way we view the world, in the way we relate to other people. But they were not perfect people. The legacy of even those we loved most dearly has not been left unmarred by the sin which infects us all. Where they made errors that cost us health or happiness, we ask your help in forgiving them. Grant us the grace and maturity to understand that they did the best they knew, by the lights they had. Help us remember them gently, as one day we ourselves will want gently to be remembered. Through Jesus who has won our victory over death. Amen. This we pray as we remember those words which Jesus prayed to you in saying.....“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”

Closing Hymn: “All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name”

All hail the power of Jesus' name!
Let angels prostrate fall.
Bring forth the royal diadem,
and crown him Lord of all.
Bring forth the royal diadem,
and crown him Lord of all!

O seed of Israel's chosen race
now ransomed from the fall,
hail him who saves you by his grace,
and crown him Lord of all.
Hail him who saves you by his grace,
and crown him Lord of all!

Let every tongue and every tribe
responsive to his call,
to him all majesty ascribe,
and crown him Lord of all.
To him all majesty ascribe,
and crown him Lord of all!

Oh, that with all the sacred throng
we at his feet may fall!
We'll join the everlasting song
and crown him Lord of all.
We'll join the everlasting song
and crown him Lord of all.

Benediction:

As we return to our lives, let us return in the assurance that God does not remain hidden in a cloud,
concealed from us. For God is still among us!
Let us not gaze longingly at heaven for a sign. For God is revealed!
Let us glimpse the face of Christ in one another. Let us celebrate the Holy Spirit, who works in our
community. Let us give glory to God our Creator, today and every day. Amen.

Postlude:

Prelude in C Major

J.S. Bach