

Second Sunday of Easter - You Shall Be My Witnesses

April 3, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Mark 6: 7-13; Acts 1: 1-14

May the spoken and written word lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

"What Now?"

Do you remember Mark's abrupt Easter story?. Several women disciples. An empty tomb. A man in white garments. Witnesses who flee in amazement and terror. And no Jesus. What now? As one preacher put it, in Mark's gospel we're to stop at the empty tomb just long enough to get directions."¹ The messenger sends the disciples to Galilee — their home territory — where Jesus promises to meet up with them. And despite all the stereotypic jokes about men and directions, the disciples go to Galilee. True to his word, Luke tells us, Jesus "*presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*" Jesus gives them their next set of directions. "Don't leave Jerusalem but wait there for the promised Holy Spirit from the Father." Jesus's resurrected body leaves them as they watch on a mountain top. His last set of directions still echoing in their ears, ""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." They stand there, gazing up toward heaven. What now? They go to Jerusalem as Jesus told them. They stayed together and prayed. What now, that Jesus was no longer physically among them to give them direction?

What now, indeed. Isn't that our story, too? We, too, find ourselves in the time between Easter and the fulfillment of God's kingdom. Jesus in his earthly, physical self, is not among us but the promised Holy Spirit brings him in our midst, in the Word and Meal, in our church and the hurts of the world. And here we come each week, in our Jerusalem upper room, to devote ourselves to worship and prayer. We ask for directions, for guidance. Being God's witnesses to the ends of the earth is not something that comes natural to us. Like those first disciples, we need direction. We need to learn how to listen for the Holy Spirit's prompting, trusting God will speak. We need to learn we are a "responsive community" who seek to follow the paths and project that God initiates² not just our whims or the pathways that are easy or catchy. We pray and earnestly seek. Because it's easy to get lost or sidetracked as you listen for the promised Spirit.

A woman was driving home one night. The weather was really nasty. Rain was coming down in buckets and visibility was very poor. Seeing taillights ahead of her, she

followed the car in front. It seemed to be going in the right direction. So she stuck with it. All of a sudden the car in front of her came to a stop. She began to wonder what had happened. Perhaps the car in front had hit a deer or some thing like that. She began to feel uncomfortable — being stopped in the middle of the road can often lead to accidents. Much to her alarm the car in front of her turned off its lights. Her concern was now growing as well as her anger. She was then startled by a knocking on her window. She looked up. The man from the car ahead had walked back and was standing in the pouring rain wanting to speak to her. She cracked the window open and asked the man what the problem was. The man replied by stating that was the very question he was going to ask her. She retorted that she wasn't the one who had stopped in the middle of the road and then turned off the car lights. The man's reply neither was he. "Lady, we're not in the middle of the road. I stopped because I'm home and you're in my driveway." This woman had chosen the wrong leader to follow. She chose a way that would not take her to where she wanted or needed to go.³

"The Holy Spirit moved Jesus in certain directions, not others."⁴ Standing on the mountain, watching Jesus ascend... sitting in that Jerusalem room devoting themselves to prayer, the disciples were coming to realize God would want them to go into certain directions and not others, too. How does one get from being a rag-tag group of average men and women meeting in a room to carrying Jesus mission to the ends of the earth? That sure wasn't a route they could see or imagine with any certainty on their own. Can you even get there from here? Don't we wonder that too? How are we to be God's witnesses in Hagerstown, in Washington County, in communities of people we might usually avoid and to the ends of the earth. That's why disciples of every generation like us have to learn to discern the prompting of the Spirit so we go where God wants and needs us to go. That is why we gather to worship together, study the Bible together, pray before meetings or voting on motions. We practice inviting the Holy Spirit to be a part of who we are and what we do. Knowingly or with faint inklings, we find our way to being the mission and missionaries we were commissioned to be.

In the early nineteen-sixties, Sam and Shirley wanted to get married. They were both divorced. Each had three children. Being married in a church was important to them. But all the churches they contacted in Hagerstown either refused or had lengthy requirements. They called Haven and Pastor Hobbes said "yes." They were married in the older church. Twenty-five years later they had a renewal of their vows here in the new sanctuary. Sam died this year on Easter. Shirley again called Haven. This time to ask if his

memorial service could be here. On Haven's behalf, I said "yes." Yesterday there were over 100 people here to honor Sam and the Lord who had given them Sam to love. The family was so grateful. On that same Saturday, seven people met to begin planning for a late July Block Party that will include a give away of much needed Back-to-School supplies.... Someone else from our neighborhood rented the Gathering Room for a baby shower.... An Al-anon group had their regular Saturday meeting.... several members began work on a new bulletin board that would provide "one and done" ministry opportunities... and at the end of the afternoon, Tom Kline, Big Brothers Big Sister's director, and his family were relieved to be able to have a gathering here when the original location suddenly cancelled just days before. I found myself marveling at the diverse ways God's grace had been active and extended on one Saturday at this mission outpost called Haven Lutheran Church. In both carefully planned and unexpected ways, the Holy Spirit was at work in and through the church and its disciples. Jesus may have ascended out of sight but his footprints could be found all around here yesterday.

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" With those words, those original 11 disciples were redirected from the past to the future. They were turned from the kingdom-that-was-not-yet-here to concentrate on what the Lord needed them to do NOW to make that kingdom come closer. "With nothing but a promise and a prayer, those eleven people consented to become the church and nothing was ever the same again....[surprising things began to happen.] [As Barbara Brown Taylor describes it] The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the converts became missionaries, the healed became healers.... It was almost as if Jesus had not ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, flew far and wide, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth."⁵ We are the result of that Holy Spirit explosion of God's power and holiness. The risen and ascended Lord confirms we have new life and certain hope. Now it is us, you and me, who are an extension of Christ's ministry. Now it is us who have access, through the Holy Spirit, to his power in order to lead, witness, and heal. Keep awake. Keep praying. Keep alert. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we're now the of Christ and we've places to go, people to love and pathways to prayerfully find and follow. What now? God knows. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 4/2/16

ENDNOTES

1. Edward C. Keefer, Jr. From his Easter sermon on March 31, 1991

2. Matt Skinner, "Commentary on Acts 1: 6-14" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org.

3. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-stories-easterpalmsunday-leader-follow-61275.asp>

4. The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad "Footprints on the Earth" Ascension Sunday May 08, 2005 as posted on www.day1.com

5. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Absence" Gospel Medicine Cambridge MA: Cowley Publications, 1995 pp 77-78