

If TOMORROW Comes

Acts 1:6-14

May 29, 2022

Expectations were—can I say it?—*sky* high. Forty days had passed since that life-changing morning when the women found an empty tomb and a living Christ on the loose in the world. For six weeks—forty days—Jesus has been teaching and preaching, healing and proclaiming God’s kingdom in Jerusalem, and it is there in the Holy City that his movement is growing. And, in the scene described in this morning’s story, the disciples have come together in hope. They are ready. They are impatient. They want to hear what comes next. Readers of the Bible, they know the significance of forty days, and so no doubt they suspect something magnificent awaits them. Would the kingdom of God descend all at once? Would the streets be paved with gold? Would there be an abrupt, sudden, all-at-once end to hatred, oppression, and violence? Would every knee bow and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord? Their minds must have been *racing* as Jesus gathers them. And with that air of anticipation thick in their midst, they ask *the* question on everyone’s mind: Is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom? Oh, how they prayed the answer would be yes! Lord, is this the time? Our time?

His response must have been more than a little disheartening for the disciples. The time, Jesus says, is *not* for you to know. Instead, he promises that the Holy Spirit will be with them in the *in between* time. He tells them that *they* will be his witnesses. And then...he leaves. He disappears behind the clouds.

Gone. Just like that. No chance to say goodbye. The disciples are understandably shaken, staring vacantly at the clouds. They are so astonished that they have no answer when two white-robed men appear to ask them the question that really gets to the heart

of this story. “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” they ask.

The disciples have no answer, but I do. Why? Because that is where our hope has gone. Why? Because heaven is the place we long to be and where our friend and our teacher has utterly vanished into thin air. What else are we supposed to do? Where else are we supposed to turn?

Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Well, what began as a day of infinite possibility (Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom?) takes a turn toward confusion and grief. That’s why. It’s a story we know too well. A man in Buffalo goes to the grocery store on a Saturday afternoon to buy a birthday cake for his three-year-old son. Church members gather on a Sunday afternoon to celebrate the ministry of a beloved pastor. Parents attend the awards ceremony celebrating the end of a fourth-grade year. Days of celebration. A focus on the bright future. They gather together with infinite possibility. And then. Unspeakable tragedy. Unbearable grief. Gone. Just like that. No chance to say goodbye. *Of course*, they stand looking up toward heaven. Of course, they do. And when they stare, they stare through a flood of tears. No words. Not now. The disciples speak no words.

Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? The question is not answered in speech. The answer lies in the action. That day the disciples *did* something, something so courageous, something so unexpected, something so extraordinary, that the story stops midstream to acknowledge them all by name. They walked back down the road to Jerusalem. And they waited.

Could it be that *waiting* is an act of faith? It is certainly a countercultural posture in an age of acceleration. I remember the words of a pastor in my life at a moment of decision that felt crushing in its weight on my shoulders. I felt the need to act immediately, felt that all the pressure was on me. Her words had the ring of gospel truth. She said, “Chris, don’t just do something. Stand there.” To wait is to trust the truth of an active God. The disciples believe the promise of Jesus. And so, they wait.

But let me be clear. Their pause was not passive. While they waited, they worked. The rest of the Book of Acts bears testimony to the work of witness that they together will do. They devoted themselves to prayer. They devoted themselves to gathering together in community, to reading ancient words of scripture and worshipping a living God, to ministries to the poor, the stranger, the outcast, and the grieving. They tend to the ordinary tasks of life in community. No, their pause was not passive. Jesus said that they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit. That will take place on Pentecost, another transcendent moment which is still to come. But *in the meantime*, the disciples turn their eyes and their hearts and their actions outward to their community. They find ordinary ways to serve with extraordinary grace.

Everyday faith. Small acts that make an immeasurable difference. It occurs to me that most of our lives aren’t about singularly dramatic acts of courage, that most of our lives do not require life-altering decisions. They are about the thousands of choices we make *in the meantime*. Today. Tomorrow. Next week.

After the ascension, sustained by the assurance of God with them, the disciples go back to Jerusalem. They settle in. They pray for their community. They learn the needs of their neighbors. They wait and they work. And they become the church. *They become the church.*

Listen. The impact of a church will never be told in in the programmatic schedule, the formal partnerships, the mission budget, and the staff

size. It is told in the lives of disciples who live the faith every single day. On soccer fields and in airplanes, in restaurants and classrooms and office buildings, in homes and hospitals and grocery stores and neighborhoods and community centers, on sidewalks and bus seats, in halls of power and influence and conversations over cups of coffee. This is where the church of Jesus Christ does its work. Picking up food donations from local stores. Delivering meals to those without enough. Teaching children the value of kindness in a hostile age. Offering the radical hospitality of Jesus. Visiting the isolated and the lonely. Pausing to listen to a neighbor’s pain or a stranger’s story. Speaking truth to power. And no matter how difficult this may be, opening our hearts to a different way and a deeper hope on the horizon.

A different way. Like you, I’ve spent much of the week immersed in the stories of horror that have plunged our nation yet again into mourning *and* instantly divided us, yet again, into opposing tribes. Some have suggested that our nation must return to God if we are to prevent such tragedies. Others have countered with the conviction that thoughts and prayers without tangible steps toward change are hollow and hypocritical. Here we find the battle lines clearly drawn.

All week long I’ve been praying. What does faithful witness look like in this moment? How can the voice of the church offer that better way to that deeper hope? Perhaps the example of the disciples can be instructive for us. In their gazing up toward heaven, they show us the power of lament. The words of scripture insist time and again, that God hears the cries of the suffering. *God hears the cries of the suffering.* God answers heartfelt pleas. The disciples devote themselves to the practice of prayer. This is no impotent response. To pray is to resist the temptation to despair and counter apathetic inaction. Karl Barth said that clasping our hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world. It’s a beginning. And it’s where the disciples start. Prayer changes things. And it is prayer that changes them. Lament leads them to hopeful action.

My friends, the same must be true of us. Advocacy and acts of compassion are not a replacement for prayer. They are the direct consequence of it. We who believe with all our hearts that God will one day bring justice for the oppressed and judgement on the oppressor, healing for the brokenhearted, and reunion for the ripped apart *also* have the responsibility to act faithfully in the present. Today. Tomorrow. Next week. Friends, the prayers of the disciples provoke prophetic deeds while they await final redemption. It is that promise of the Spirit's presence that gives them courage to act the faith they profess.

What can *we* do? Surely, we who follow the Prince of Peace, who hear prophets command beating swords into plowshares, can agree that weapons of war have no place in the hands of teenagers or the communities in which we live. Surely, we whose holy scripture calls us to look not to the interests of ourselves but to the interests of others must believe that all freedoms carry corresponding responsibilities. Surely, we who follow Jesus, the one who welcomed the children with open arms, can lift our voices to do everything we can to protect the lives of students in their classrooms. Surely.

But, friends, our call to faithful witness is deeper even than that. The disciples of Jesus immersed themselves in the needs of their neighbors. We must do the same. As I've reflected on the stories behind the headlines in recent weeks, there are unmistakable common threads that speak to the call of the Church in this moment. Those common threads include the accessibility and promotion of ideologies rooted in hatred for the other. It must stop. The fraying of communities of care and accountability. We must weave those communities back together. The glorification of violence in all forms of media. We must turn away from that. The evaporation of values that hold us together and call forth our better angels. We must speak those values in the public square. Now look, I understand that there is no legislative approach, no outreach program, no corporation, no congregation, no word spoken in prayer, and certainly no sermon that can entirely prevent the

kind of pain we've seen from being repeated. Only God's justice offers a final answer.

But for God's sake let's try. For God's sake, let's refuse to accept the apathy and indifference that insists that there is no other way. For God's sake, let's resist resorting to rhetoric and instead bring divergent views together for the good we hold in common. For God's sake, let's lift the values that we hold, shaped by prayer and grounded in hope. For God's sake, let's answer the call that is ours as people of Christian faith. Not either/or. *Both/and.* Prayer *and* action. Compassion *and* immersion. Lamentation *and* legislation. I am persuaded that to follow Jesus Christ now requires this of us. For, my friends, what good is the power we have been granted if we refuse to employ it for the good of the innocent? What good is the abundance that is ours if we hoard it only for ourselves? What good is the gift of life that we have been given if we refuse to pour it out, as Jesus himself calls us to do?

Several years ago now, I attended a conference at Emory University. It was hosted by the Candler School of Theology, and one of the great preachers of the last century, Fred Craddock, preached. He preached two sermons that weekend, but it was Dr. Craddock's benediction at the final worship service that has returned to my mind most often.

Just before the benediction, a bluegrass band played a rousing rendition of that great 1932 gospel hymn, "I'll Fly Away." *Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away. To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away. Just a few more weary days...to a land where joy shall never end.*

After the song, the great preacher stepped up, flashed a smile, and began his benediction with the words, "In the meantime..." Chuckles filled the room, then silence, as he repeated, "In the meantime..."

That's all we have. The meantime is our only time. That dash between our birthdate and the day, unknown to us now, when we will take our last earthly breath. The meantime is our only time. To

love and serve, to speak God's truth. To share a vision of God's kingdom in word and in action. For God's sake, let's make the most of the meantime. Amen.