

What Now?
An Ascension Sunday Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
May 28, 2017
Luke 24:44-53

42 days ago, we gathered in the labyrinth just before dawn. And as the sun crept slowly over the horizon, a pinkish hue filled the sky, and we read Mary's familiar words: "I have seen the Lord." And for a fleeting moment, it was Easter.

And I can't help but wonder: how is it that 42 days seems a lifetime ago?

But it HAS been a lifetime, because we've been busy: two baby dedications, several Sardis academies, a graduation picnic, a staff trip to the Alliance of Baptists meeting; youth lake day; another yard cleanup day; seven more choir practices; six more sermons written; 41 news cycles with a dozen mini-cycles each day; Mother's Day and Memorial Day; and exams; and doctor appointments, and board meetings; and Easter candy that's gone stale; and...where does the time go???

If you are like me, it's pretty easy to forget that it's still the season of Easter. I mean after all, we're busy people, and we don't have time to focus on things for more than a few days. This is the third rock from the sun, and it's in motion, y'all. And you'd better keep up!!!

But did you know that Easter is actually a 50-day celebration — Seven Sundays of remembrance of an event that fundamentally shifted our understanding of God, and of God's access in our lives. Too often, on Resurrection Sunday, we say our Amens after John 20:18, grab a hunk of Easter ham, and set our sights on the next event in our calendar.

But the liturgical calendar beckons us to slow down, even linger on the events of Easter. It urges us to consider Resurrection Sunday as the start of a crescendo that ends seven weeks later on the Day of Pentecost.

This makes good sense. We don't simply swallow major life events and go on about our business. Usually, we make time for a transitional period.

Newlyweds enjoy a honeymoon; new parents take parental leave; loved ones grieve after a loss; newly-elected officials transition between election day and inauguration day; hospital patients transition from surgery to recovery to rehab to wellness; travelers take time to acclimate to new surroundings. In a sense, we need time to become who we will be.

Transition. That's where we find the disciples in this morning's passage, and I dare say, that's where we find ourselves as well. Christ the Lord has risen. Now what?

Luke's account tells us that on Sunday morning, Mary and the other women saw the empty tomb, and heard news of resurrection from two men in dazzling white. Jesus revealed himself to Cleopas and a companion following a visit on the road to Emmaus. And when they returned to Jerusalem, the disciples told them that Jesus had appeared to Simon as well.

And as the group shared this gossip, Jesus appeared among them once more, and said, "You got anything to eat? I'm starving!" And he ate broiled fish in their presence.

The disciples see all of this. They sense all of this. But they are still terrified. And confused. And doubting. And overwhelmed. Is all of this really happening?!? It's all just too good to be true.

And don't be too hard on them for that. Because the truth is, you and I would be just as out of sorts. For instance, when Jacqueline and I go to the beach each June, that first day on vacation, we lie on the sand by the water, and one of us says to the other, "Are we really here?" And it takes us three days not to ask that question.

Or other more common but no less miraculous miracles:

Did he or she really say "yes?"

Can this tiny, little thing really be a person? And can I really be her mom or dad?

Can a bull's valve or a steel tube, or a metal rod really heal a failing heart or weakened knee? And will I really feel the way I used to feel, even better?

Is my schoolwork really done – like finished? Like no more homework or exams?

Is there really light and grace and hope and relief at the end of all this grief and pain?

It takes us time to understand and accept these rather common miracles. So shouldn't we give the disciples a little leeway when it comes to witnessing an even more extraordinary miracle?

The disciples are in shock – it's a good shock. But it's still shock. It all's too good to be true. And they are waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Jesus recognizes the disciples' shock, and gathers them around him – and today, somehow, someday, he opens their minds and their spirits to his teachings. For so long, they had stumbled their way through the Gospel...The Kingdom of Heaven is like...well, not quite. But here, in this moment, Jesus opens their hearts to understand the scriptures, to understand that they dwell in the presence of God.

Jesus says: "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

Jesus tells the disciples that they are living in reality. What seems impossible to believe is actually possible. God is accessible. And God is present. And God is big enough to offer grace and wholeness and belonging and value to all of humanity. The hospitality, the friendship, the love, the collective relationship that the disciples have with Jesus – Jesus tells them that this is real, and of God, and now able to be manifested through them to others. They are witnesses, valid witnesses of God's presence in the world.

And all at once, the disciples no longer doubt. The disciples are freed to believe; freed to live into God's goodness. Freed to take the too out of "too good."

Jesus asks them to follow him to Bethany, a place on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and the place where he entered the city on that first Palm Sunday. He tells them he must go. He instructs them to wait in Jerusalem, for they will be clothed with powers from on high. And then he blesses them. You might call it a commissioning of sorts. In essence, he tells them: "You are ready. And you are capable. So go and be who I have called you to be."

And then, in a mysterious manner similar to Moses and Elijah, he transitions from this world to the next. And just as Joshua and Elisha had done before them, the disciples transition into leaders.

And as our text ends, our new leaders cross back into Jerusalem, just as Jesus has done before them. And here, in the Holy City, they wait with purpose and hope. And in their waiting, they worship with joyful hearts.

They don't know it yet, but Pentecost is coming. When it comes, they will be equipped to recognize it.

Six weeks into Eastertide, the disciples finally understand and embrace the events of Sunday. But this morning, the question remains: Do we?

It's easy to proclaim a risen Christ when the sun shines, and when we're clothed in bright pastels, and when the entire city pauses to sing loud hosannas.

But as this Eastertide matures, the headlines recount acts of terror in Manchester and Egypt and even in Portland, Oregon; a lack of empathy and civility from our elected leaders; and systems that segregate our schools and parcel our resources in inequitable ways. And our loud hosannas grow faint. And we wonder: "Is it all too good to be true?"

In such a time and place as this, we cannot allow Easter to be reduced to a day, or even to an idea. Easter is not a moment. And Easter is not a happy, fleeting, fanciful thought. Easter is truth. Easter is reality.

God dwells in each of us and through each of us and with each of us. And like the disciples before us, God has made this truth apparent to each of us and accessible to each of us. And we must undergird ourselves with the love and grace God offers each of us, in order that we too may be equipped to recognize and receive the spirit that will come upon us at Pentecost.

The world is different, but no less chaotic than in Jesus' time. There was still terror. And there was still corruption and greed. And there were still broken systems.

It seems to me that the disciples kept waiting for such chaos to dispel God's truth. And it seems to me that we do the same. But I don't think Christ ever claimed he'd make the chaos of this earth disappear. Instead, I think Christ promised that despite the chaos of this world, God would still be present, and God's kingdom would still be near.

For Caesar has not lost his imperial seal, and the truth is he most likely never will. But no matter: For in Christ, the blind will still find their sight, the captives will still find their release, and the oppressed will still go free.

I believe that Eastertide is a season to reflect on what Christ has done and what Christ calls us to do:
Love God and love neighbor.

Do you want to hasten an end to terror? Christ says expand your definition of neighbor.
Do you want to strengthen your community? Christ says lead with love.
Do you want to weaken the impact of corrupt systems? Christ says stop clinging to privilege.

When you do these things, we become witnesses of Easter. And when we do these things, the kingdom comes near.

Friends, each of us stand at the gates of our own Jerusalem. We've had time to process Easter, and we await the winds of Pentecost.

And we too hear Mary's witness: "Christ the Lord is risen."

And we ask ourselves, "What now?"

Christ offers the same response given to an earnest lawyer:

"Go. And do likewise."

May God give us the courage to make it so. And to make it soon. Amen.