

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 24, 2020

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Pasadena, Maryland

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On Thursday we had the privilege of celebrating the Feast of the Ascension at St. Martin's in Severna Park, with Bishop Ihloff preaching. It was good to see so many people from St. Andrew's logged onto the Facebook feed, and the video is still available on St. Martin's Facebook page for those of you who couldn't join in on Thursday.

Thanks to Twitter I was exposed for the first time this week to the joke that on the Feast of the Ascension we celebrate the day Jesus started working from home. That's true, though there's more to it, but I'll leave that there for now. What I want to talk about this morning is Jesus' conversation with his disciples just before he ascended.

As you may know, the book of Acts is really the 2nd volume of the work Luke began with his Gospel. After the first couple of introductory verses, Luke picks up in our Acts reading where he left off, with the risen Jesus talking with his disciples about what's coming next. What's coming next? "You're going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit," says Jesus. Now, this seems to me like it would be a pretty big deal, something the disciples could get really excited about. "Remember John's baptism, guys? Remember how he baptized with water? Well, in just a few days you're going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4-5).

And so of course they're more excited about this than anything else, they can't wait to be clothed with power from on high so that they can tell everyone the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Right? No. What's the next thing we read? "So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'" (1:6).

Now, one privilege of being a pastor is that you get to hear the things couples say to each other as the ceremony gets started. The father walks the bride up the aisle, he kisses her and hands her off to the groom, and the two of them hold each other's hands and turn to me. Sometimes the groom tells her she looks amazing. Sometimes one of them tells the other that they're nervous. Sometimes one is fighting to push back tears. Most times I have to tell them to move a few inches to one side or the other so they'll be centered for the photographs.

But what I never hear from them is, "Hey, when can we pick out paint colors for the hall bathroom together?" Why not? Because that's not the point. That's not what's important about being married. Does it come along with? Sure. You get married, you pick out paint colors together—or, if you're smart, the spouse who doesn't really care feigns interest and cooperation as the other spouse picks what she wants. But that's not the essence of marriage. Jesus restoring the kingdom to Israel is part and parcel of his lordship of the entire universe, but it's not the essence of it. Nobody goes to a fancy restaurant—well, nobody can right now, but when they can, nobody says, "Wow, I can't believe I'm going to get to use six different forks before the night is out." None of us, while we were lined up outside the chapel for our seminary

graduation, were talking about how excited we were to buy the little tabs that hold your clergy collar to your clergy shirt. These things come along with, but they're not the main thing.

And as I think about what the decisions we need to make in the coming weeks and months, I feel like I'm supposed to make sure we avoid looking like the disciples on Ascension Day. I think we need to make sure we aren't missing the point. So I want to share with you what I'm thinking about as I work with our Bishop and our Vestry to determine how we will proceed with making fuller use of our building.

First, I need to say, emphatically, that we are not going to reopen. The reason we are not going to reopen is that we never closed. At the Bishop's request, we did encourage our people to worship via the Cathedral's livestream for some services we had been planning to hold here. But apart from March 22nd, when we directed everybody to the Cathedral, we've been holding worship services here at St. Andrew's every Sunday morning, usually twice. And we're going to continue doing that. Beyond our usual support this church has stepped up to provide generously for those in need in our community, and we as a Vestry are committed to continue doing that. Recently we received a generous bequest, and our Vestry decided unanimously to set aside 10% of it to give away over the course of this year to serve the needs of our neighbors. People in this church continue to pray for each other, to call each other, to help each other out. So there's no question about reopening; we've been open. The questions we do need to work through have to do with what our building use will look like as more people are able to use it.

I imagine that you're primarily thinking about what that means for worship on Sunday mornings; please remember that this building God has given us is put to use for other things as well. As soon as the County and the Diocese permit us to, and as soon as AA is ready to meet in person here again, we will make our space available to the Saturday morning group, and to any other group that needs space. I thank God that there are people who have found sobriety through the online offerings of AA and other groups, but it's much better for most people to have the option to get together in person. The Boy Scouts, likewise, will be able to meet in person once they've decided they're ready to. Those groups may decide to meet outdoors so more people can participate safely; that will be up to them.

Even before we open for those meetings, we have been given permission to make our facility available for the Red Cross Blood Drive on June 3rd; thanks to those of you who have signed up either to donate or to volunteer. They don't have a lot of donation sites in this area so if all goes well on the 3rd we'll probably have another later in the summer. Just last week our space was reserved again for the Pearl Harbor commemoration the first weekend of December, and of course we'll be hosting Winter Relief in November. We have taken advantage of the fact that the space wasn't being used to get some painting done upstairs and in the stairwells; thanks to Steve Linkous for his good work. Our Junior Warden, Rich Crothers, has been taking advantage of extra time off of work, and the beautiful weather, to get the Memorial Garden in excellent shape; thanks to him and to all the other folks who have volunteered over the past weeks to enable us to put our best foot forward.

In other words, this church continues to be faithful stewards of the facility God has provided us, and we are preparing for it to be put to greater use. But as we do we will be sure to keep in mind the safety of the most vulnerable among us. There will be some changes for all of us in terms of keeping doors open and staying 6 feet away from each other and sanitizing restrooms each time they're used and so forth. Some things will be different, and some of them will be very different. We'll let you know about those differences as we approach the time when we can gather in person to worship again. These changes will take some getting used to for all of us, but I'm confident we will be able to figure out what we need to figure out. Among the things that has struck me in the past couple of months has been the fact that the people of this church are always ready to roll up their sleeves and get to work, cheerfully, on whatever needs to be done. This excellent attitude is one of the things that makes me hopeful we won't be looking foolish like the disciples.

The other thing that makes me hopeful is that I think we have a sense of perspective. You may have noticed that I spent a lot more time talking about this building's use apart from our worship on Sundays than I did talking about what our services are going to be like. That's because the worship our church offers God doesn't just happen in this room. Remember, the reason Jesus told his disciples they would be given power from on high was that they would need that power to do the job he had for them. They were about to take the news of his life, death and resurrection throughout Jerusalem, throughout Judea, throughout Samaria, and beyond to the farthest reaches of the world. We come together in this space to give God the praise due his name,

and to share the joy of fellowship; but we also come here to be prepared for the mission he has for us.

In our prayers after Communion we ask God to “Send us now into the world in peace,” or to “send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.” You may have noticed that when I give the Offertory Sentence I begin by quoting what Paul said about the Eucharist: “When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). We proclaim it in the act of celebrating Communion together; furthermore, that act is one of the ways God equips us to do that work of bearing witness to him however he wants us to do that.

That’s what this church is for. It’s not our church, really; it’s Jesus’. It’s his church, and it’s to be put to use for his purposes. We have the privilege of being entrusted with its stewardship. And the year and a half I have had the privilege of serving as your priest gives me every confidence that we will one day hear him tell us, “Well done, good and faithful servants.”

One more thing: the Acts reading tells us that it wasn’t given to the disciples to know the time and manner by which God would work out his purposes. It’s perfectly natural to want to know when something is going to happen. There’s a reason we all can joke about the kids asking, “Are we there yet?”—because they always do. Likewise many of us are asking, “When can we gather for worship again?” I’m afraid the answer for us is the same answer the disciples were given: that’s not for us to know. As is so often the case, we’ll know what we need to know when we need to know it, and probably not much before that. One of my

mentors used to say that God is never late, but he does miss a lot of chances to be early. Here again our call is to wait patiently for him to make the way clear for us, and as we wait to prepare ourselves to walk in it.

Amen.