

“Be My Witnesses”

John 17:1-11; Acts 1:6-14 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 24, 2020

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our faith might be strengthened in the hope of your promises and our witness be faithful. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

First of all, let's get this straight: Angels aren't very good at explaining things. “Why are you standing there, staring up toward heaven? Jesus is coming back that exact way.” Um, isn't that a good reason to stand there, staring up toward heaven? If they'd said something about getting ready to receive the Holy Spirit, or preparing to be witnesses, or even just something about timing, their question would have made a lot more sense. As it was, it just sounds like those angels offered the disciples a solid rationale for the exact behavior they were questioning.

Angelic linguistic ineptitude aside, it's fascinating how on the nose this week's scriptures are. The circumstances are not that similar. The disciple were nearing on seven weeks of hanging out with Risen Jesus, while we have passed the two-month mark for safer-at-home orders. But there are multiple striking points of connection here. “Lord, is this the time?” we ask. Over and over, every day, with every new announcement from the County or the Governor. Is this the time? When is the time? When should we start thinking that the time might be soon? If the time isn't now yet, when will it be now? Will we find out when the time is with enough warning to adequately cover the plans for it to be the time in the newsletter and our weekly

emails? If it's time for that, when will it be time for this? If you say it's time, how do we decide if we think it's time?

And the answer we keep hearing to all these questions is basically the same as what Jesus told the disciples: "It is not for you to know the time." Except the "you" for us is really more of a "we". We don't know. The people we're looking to for answers don't know. We can't know. We might know when the time gets here, but then again, we might not. The timing of the time simply depends on too many factors that no one can control. And boy, is that aggravating!

One of the things that makes us human is our tendency to plan for the future, whether it's what we'll do tomorrow or three months from now, or how we'll make sure we're able to carry out those activities. Making plans gives us pleasure: it gives us hope. Having something to anticipate is one of the great, simple joys of human life. Not knowing what will be possible in the coming weeks and months renders this basic human activity nonsensical. It's like our sense of the passage of time has been thrown into a never-ending hall-of-mirrors maze. We can only think in conditional phrases, with lots of "if's" and "maybe's".

So perhaps it is not surprising that we often find ourselves doing exactly what the disciples were doing – the current equivalent of standing staring up into heaven. When we lose something, the question we ask is "where did you see it last?" So why wouldn't we be looking at the hole in the sky that swallowed Jesus up? Or in this case, why wouldn't we be focused on our beautiful sanctuary, where we last

experienced the gathered body of Christ in community around the Table of Love?

Isn't that the most obvious thing to be doing?

But then those angels show up, asking us what the hey we're doing. And even if the answer should be obvious – we're looking back at that thing we love that was taken away from us – it's probably important to consider why they're asking. And to think about whether the questions we're asking are any more sensible than the one the angels are asking. Could it be that there is a more fruitful question than “Lord, is this the time?”

I am reminded of another moment when the disciples had a mountaintop experience with Jesus, and he was very clear that putting up a building to memorialize the event was the opposite of what they should do. Standing still, staring at the clouds is not what Jesus just told them to do here either. What did he say? ‘The Holy Spirit is coming! You will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth.’ What if he's saying that to us too? What if instead of asking when the time will be when normalcy will be restored, we started asking ourselves how we can prepare to receive the Holy Spirit? What if instead of asking how we can get back what we lost, we started asking what we need to be doing to witness to Jesus' sacrificial love in our world as it is today?

If we can move through the shock and the loss and start to ask these questions instead, we will discover, as the disciples did, that Jesus has already given us everything we need. If we can return to our homes and devote ourselves to prayer,

we will be reminded that Jesus' words and work have been handed over to us, that we might glorify God just as he did. We will remember that through Jesus, God has confirmed that we are God's beloved children, called to live in unity here in this world, that the world might know hope. This is what it means to be Jesus' witnesses. We do not need to be in the sanctuary to do that. Jesus sent us to the ends of the earth, not one building.

Witty wags on the internet have been referring to Jesus' ascension into heaven as the day he started working from home. Being sent to the ends of the earth sounds pretty exciting right now, since so many of us have felt stuck at home. But we've got to remember that our homes are one end of the earth. The grocery store we venture into every week or two is an end of the earth. The doctor's office, the drive-thru lane, even the internet, and most especially all those places where some of you are still working in essential jobs – these places are all ends of the earth, crying out for testimony to the hope we know in Christ and the love God has for all of us. The church has been deployed, not closed. Why should we stand still, looking back at what we lost, when Jesus is offering us all sorts of new opportunities for bearing witness to God's abiding love?

If you don't feel ready to testify yet, do what the disciples did. Stay home and devote yourself to prayer. The Holy Spirit is on her way. A re-birth for Christ's church is just around the corner. Hallelujah and Amen!