

“Take Your Place”

Acts 1:6-17, 21-26 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 16, 2021

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might prepare to welcome your Holy Spirit once again and re-commit ourselves to following your Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Have you ever thought about what it was like in those early days? The 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead, which are just coming to an end now? Or the days and weeks after he ascended into heaven and the church was starting to figure out how to be in the world without his physical presence? There aren't stories of Jesus making public appearances or teaching on hilltops during this period, so I think we've often thought about it as an intimate time of communion between Jesus and his disciples, a final moment for the inner circle to prepare to say good-bye.

The gospel accounts are strongly influenced by the desire to fit Jesus into the Hebrew narrative of the Messiah. One of the ways they do that is by emphasizing the twelve disciples. We all know that there are twelve disciples, even if we couldn't all name each and every one of them. You probably know that those twelve disciples match up with the twelve tribes of Israel, named (more or less) for Jacob's many sons. Once Judas had betrayed Jesus and subsequently died, that need to have twelve disciples pushed Peter to suggest they replace Judas, so they could be complete, as we heard in our scripture reading today. Our understanding of the way things were in the immediate community around Jesus is shaped by this emphasis on the twelve.

But what struck me in reading the story of the Ascension this year is not the emphasis on the twelve, but how many other people were around. When they got back from Mount Olivet, the eleven remaining disciples are named as present. But “certain women” are there too, presumably Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women mentioned by Luke as the ones who discovered the empty tomb. In addition to these disciples, Jesus’ family is there too, his mother and his brothers. That expands the group from eleven to what – maybe around twenty?

But then Peter is standing up – no mention that they’ve left the room where they were staying – and he starts speaking to everyone, and we’re told that it’s actually about 120 people! This is clearly not an intimate, inner circle gathering. This is “the believers” and there are plenty of them. Men, women, probably children too, given what happens when people gather together. The symbolism of “the twelve” is clearly significant, given that they make the effort to carefully and prayerfully replace Judas. But it’s also obvious that there are way more than twelve people involved in this ministry, even before Jesus has left the ground.

We’re not told how many men there are who have been with them from the beginning, that is, how many of them fit into the category Peter proposed for the candidates for replacement. Presumably not all of those 120 people qualified. (Presumably more than 7 of them were women!) But if Justus and Matthias were proposed out of those who were eligible, there must have been more than two. All

along, this “inner circle” seems to have been much less exclusive than we often imagine. What are we to make of this?

We often think of the Ascension as the moment when the disciples began to realize that it was now going to be on them to carry out the ministry begun by Jesus. Next week, we will be celebrating the arrival of the Holy Spirit that makes that possible. But I want to pause for just a moment today and think about what this expanded understanding of the community around Jesus means for how we think about church.

What happened with Justus and Matthias reminds me a little bit of the work our Nominating Committee has been doing over the past few months. They don’t cast lots, but we do try to cover the process with lots of prayer and seek God’s guidance. The Committee is overjoyed when they have multiple qualified candidates for a particular slot. It’s interesting to note that this story from Acts doesn’t mention anything about whether Justus or Matthias, or anyone else for that matter, was ready to say Yes to the job, though I suppose it might have come down to those two because others declined to be considered. The leadership roles that our Nominating Committee is working to fill are important to the life of our church, as the leadership roles of the twelve were to the early church. But this story makes clear that the church is so much more than the leaders. The Holy Spirit isn’t just coming for them. There is a place for everyone here. With no one to follow, what would be the point of leading?

There's part of me that wishes we had a bunch more books of the Bible that would tell us the stories of these less prominent believers. What did they do? How did they fit into the community? Where did they come from? Maybe we actually have some of those stories, from the gospels passages that tell us about the various people Jesus healed or taught. Maybe some of them became part of the band of believers, and it just didn't seem necessary to document that part.

But this desire for more stories is sort of like wishing Jesus had never left. The lesson from the Ascension is that it's our turn. So rather than reading stories about those ancient disciples, it's time to focus on creating our own stories. You are part of the band of believers. You are part of the Body of Christ. It's been a long, weird year, and we've all struggled to figure out how we do this thing called church with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. But that is about to shift, so it's almost time to take your place in the community of Christ again. What is that story going to look like? Are you going to go back to doing what you did before? Are you up for trying something new? Are there things you've discovered you didn't miss much, that don't seem worth resuming?

It's kind of like we're in a great theater production, and the stage manager is calling out, "Places, please!" Except I'm pretty sure this is an improv show, with nothing more than a clear theme, perhaps "Love your neighbor", which all of us are supposed to respond to when it's our turn. What's your line? What props will you need? Who is in your scene with you? Is it a musical? Oh, I hope so!

It's not that Jesus is gone, exactly. It's more like Jesus is the script writer or the producer. There are clear directions about what this production is about. But each of us has to determine our own lines as we go. And the cast is ever-expanding. This isn't a buddy movie between you and Jesus. And it's not a re-make of Twelve Angry Men with a twist. There is a cast of millions. But in the vastness of that there is a place for you. It could be that you're being selected for a leadership role. But it could also be that we need you in the chorus. Wherever you are, you are a vital part of what God is doing here at Vista La Mesa Christian Church. And the Holy Spirit is coming for all of us! Hallelujah and Amen.