

“Living in the In-Between”

Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might gain courage and wisdom from your everlasting presence. In the name of the Risen Christ we pray, Amen.

Where would we be without the disciples? Stories like the one we heard this morning make me wonder how things would have developed if the disciples weren't so prominently featured in the gospels. Would Christianity have even gotten off the ground? Or would scriptures that were just focused on what Jesus said, without the questions his followers asked, have set up a standard too high to aspire to? Without the disciples in the stories, I'm not sure we could find ourselves within them either. Sure, portions of the gospels are very intent on helping us see and embrace Jesus' humanity. But they tend to leave the most human stuff to the disciples.

How do you feel about the statement, often said by teachers, that “there is no such thing as a dumb question”? How do you think Jesus would have responded to such a statement? This is one of those “on the one hand, on the other” things, really. On the one hand, there are questions that could be seen as dumb because they are asking for simple answers when no such response is possible. On the other hand, if the “dumb” question is expressing a sense of confusion or even fear commonly shared among the group having the discussion, perhaps the question does have a non-dumb purpose.

This all seems the case at the beginning of the passage we just heard from Acts. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” the disciples asked him. There they are, being human! Like really human. We like to know what’s going to happen next. We like to imagine life has a schedule, a plan, and we like to think that our leaders are going to take decisive action to fix things. How about now, Lord? Despite the fact that these people have spent months following him around, listening to Jesus re-define words like “restoration” and “kingdom,” they still really want a victory that is recognizable by worldly standards. As the internet would say, “I am in this picture, and I don’t like it.”

What did they think he was going to say? Were there still disciples imagining that the answer would be Yes? “Yes, let’s sit down and plot out our strategy for overthrowing the Roman empire. I’ve just been waiting to get resurrected before getting our battle plans started.” Does that sound like Jesus? It does not. Instead, he told them they didn’t get to know when (if?) God was going to do that part. And then he made some cryptic promises about a whole new chapter involving something called the Holy Spirit. And then he took off – whoosh! – up to the sky. Buh-bye!

It's impressive, given the supernatural focus of this story, how very human it manages to remain. Even the angels reinforce this desire for decisive action that fixes things. When they chastise the disciples for standing still looking up at the heavens, the event they reference is not the coming of the Holy Spirit in wind and fire, but the Second Coming, about which Jesus himself was much more vague. It seems the

angels would prefer to skip the next chapter and move straight to the victorious conclusion as well. But that's not how it works.

Instead we wait. And honestly, despite what we might think we want and need, this time between when Jesus takes off into the clouds and when the Holy Spirit will make her blustery arrival on the scene is a gift. Because like those early disciples, we are very much living in the in-between, and some guidance about how to do so faithful would be a blessing.

Do you remember back in the early days of the pandemic, when we counted on the idea that someday there would be a clear end to our predicament, and we could get back to normal? Do you remember that at one point, we were trying to figure out what we would need to do to open up the sanctuary in August of 2020? Do you remember how we had no idea the pandemic would last so long that we would lose track of our previous understandings of normal? How we were trying to “learn the lessons of the pandemic” but still hadn’t realized that nothing would ever be the same as it had been?

We have made various shifts that seemed to indicate the end of certain phases of this period of global upheaval. But I don’t think I’m alone in having a strong sense that we’re still waiting for clarity, still waiting for things to settle, to feel “normal” again, to recover. I, for one, would prefer to think that we’re waiting for the Holy Spirit to show up, rather than holding our breath until the other shoe drops. So I give

thanks for this story of the disciples, asking their human questions, doing their natural human things, because it gives me hope to see our situation reflected in scripture.

Even the angels' impertinent question is more helpful than it seems. It's always seemed to me like those angels were messing with the disciples a little bit. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." I don't know about you, but my mother taught me that when I lost something, I should think back to the last place I saw it and look there. Why wouldn't they be staring at the sky? And if that's the way he's coming back, why wouldn't they watch for him? For all they were frightening, I'm pretty sure angels are just as likely to be annoying.

But their irritatingly delivered advice is not wrong. We cannot move into the future looking backwards. As we move through this milestone year, trying to discern more clearly who we are as congregation and what God is calling us to do in this moment of history, it's tempting to try to pick up where we left off. Twenty-some months into an extended season of cultivating vitality and growth, we had celebrated new members and a growing sense of purpose. Is re-capturing that really where God is leading us now, three years later? How do we tell? How do we discern what to salvage, and what to replace with new ideas and new ways of doing things? What do we do to open our hearts and our minds and our community to the arrival of the Holy Spirit? How long will this in-between last, and what are we doing in the meantime?

It's nice that the story goes on in Acts. Once the angels had pointed out how silly they looked, standing there staring at the sky, the disciples went home. Well, not home exactly. They didn't go their separate ways, to their own houses. They went back to the place where they were staying. That is, they returned to community. Even though they didn't know what was next, or what the purpose of their community was anymore, they kept the community intact. They did not abandon one another or go solo. They stayed together, and they did what Christians do when we don't know what else to do: they prayed.

We don't know what they prayed or how they prayed or who led the prayers. The verse just says they "devoted themselves" to prayer, constantly. But we do have this other prayer, the one John's gospel has Jesus praying in the disciples' presence shortly before his death. And if we're looking for assurance, this prayer is a good place to turn. Jesus was praying to God, but he was doing it out loud, and he clearly wanted the disciples to take his words to heart. The writer of John, as you know, is a huge fan of repetition for emphasis. And in this case, it's entirely appropriate. What did Jesus repeat? These are your people, God. They know that you sent me. They have been faithful. Things are coming that will be hard, but they are all for glory. This is bigger than it will seem, and it's all held in your arms of love. I will have to leave them, but I can do that, because they are yours, held in your hands. We are one. They are yours. We are one. We are one.

I believe that the Holy Spirit is coming. I don't know when she's going to get here. I would love to have a schedule, something I could put down on the calendar, but at the moment, that clarity has not been given me. As much as it irritates me, I think the angels are probably right that looking where we last had our clarity is not going to reveal it now. But I also know that inasmuch as God has any kind of plan, it very clearly includes humanity. It includes us. Not just because of the blessed presence of the disciples asking dumb questions all the way through the gospels. But because I know that we are God's, that we are continually being invited into faithfulness, into proclaiming the word that Jesus gave us, with our speech and our actions. I know that we are one, even when division seems threatening to destroy our world. I know that God is with us in the in-between. I know that Christ's promises are good. I know that the Holy Spirit will sustain us, now, next week, and forevermore. Hallelujah and Amen.