

## **“With You Always”**

Matthew 28:16-20 Acts 1:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might keep our eyes on  
Jesus, even as the world changes. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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I'm not sure what it is about this year – whether it's the lectionary scriptures or just the moment we're in – but I feel like the liturgical boundaries between Eastertide and Pentecost have completely been erased. We're supposed to be welcoming the fiery arrival of the Holy Spirit next week, but if you've been paying attention, you've probably noticed, she's already here. She's been here, for weeks now. Is there an appreciable difference between the Spirit of the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit? Not one I'm particularly interested in parsing, though you can do as you like, of course.

Now we've arrived at Ascension Sunday, when we remember Jesus being taken up into the heavens after promising the disciples that the Holy Spirit will arrive and baptize them soon. Next Sunday will be Pentecost, when we officially commemorate the version of that that is described in the Book of Acts. But if we look back: When Cleopas and his companion felt that burning in their hearts as Jesus opened the scriptures to them on the road? The Spirit that fell upon Cornelius and his household, leading Peter to baptize them, despite their gentleness? The openness of

Lydia, urging Paul and his friends to stay with her after hearing the gospel? All of it is the Spirit. It's been swirling around us for weeks now. She is with us always, even when the Risen Christ is taking center stage.

The thing about the Spirit is that she's always moving. She's most noticeable – and most needed – in times of transition. And even though we usually think of Easter as a day or a season, it's really more a process. The resurrection is just the beginning. It's what grows out of the resurrection that stays with us. So if Eastertide is not just a season, but a process, an extended time of transition, it makes sense that the Spirit is hovering nearby. And goodness, isn't that a life-saver?

The truth is that we don't love times of transition, do we? Life changes can be good – like graduations or marriages – or bad – like deaths or job loss – but they're always stressful, even if they're positive changes. When we're going through transition as a congregation – whether because of a pastoral change, or financial constraints, or new relationships with other groups, or launching a new ministry – it's really important to hold onto the promise of the Holy Spirit. Because at some level, the promise of the Holy Spirit is the promise of Jesus: “Remember, I am with you always.”

This season of transition that we call Eastertide gives us an opportunity to walk with the disciples through a time of great uncertainty and learn from their experiences how to navigate such difficulties ourselves. There is a lot we can learn from these

stories, and that's definitely "stories" with an "s," because there are a few different versions of them! I've long considered it a blessing that we have four different gospel accounts, but today we get to add in the Book of Acts as a fifth. We often consider Acts the second volume of Luke, but in today's case, it qualifies as a different version of the story because this passage we read from Acts actually tells the story of the Ascension differently than it's recounted at the end of Luke. In Luke, it sounds as though it happened on Easter night, shortly after Cleopas and his friend got back to Jerusalem to tell everyone else what had happened to them. But Acts is very clear that there were forty days of Jesus appearing before he took off into the sky. In seasons of transition, time can get a little confusing. That feels familiar, doesn't it?

Luke and Acts do agree on one thing though: they both tell us that Jesus told the disciples to stay in Jerusalem. Which is interesting because in Matthew, the final good-bye scene takes place in Galilee, where the disciples have gone because the Risen Christ explicitly told Mary and her companions to tell them he would meet them there. Not having a firm handle on where we are is another common characteristic of seasons of transition, whether that's physical or metaphorical. The whens and the wheres of change are often very confusing. Do we find Jesus by looking where we last saw him, or by going back to where we first met him? The biblical witness tells us the answer is Yes. And yet, this story from Acts warns us that times of transition may also involve people giving us really confusing advice.

Did you hear those angels? It's almost like they are mocking the disciples, honestly. "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." Wait, what? You're telling me he's coming back down this same way, but you don't understand why I'm standing here watching these clouds? Angels really are a different breed. But they're not the only ones who pass out confusing advice. There are plenty of consultants who would like to apply their experience from other places to our situation, regardless of how well it fits. There are plenty of commentators who will offer critiques of the many things they think we're wasting our time and energy on, who don't seem to fully appreciate what it means to be church. Sometimes, we just need to take a breath. And like those disciples, we want to keep our eyes on Jesus while we do it.

Does it get harder once he's swallowed up by the clouds? Sure. But remember that Spirit? That Spirit that's been whistling and dancing around this whole time, waiting for her moment to shine? She's still here! And that whole dance, the primary movement of it, is still pointing at Jesus. And what is Jesus pointing at? "Go make disciples," he said, "teaching them my commandments." And what is that commandment? We've heard it over and over. "I give you a new commandment: that you love one another." This is how we keep our eyes on Jesus, regardless of what is going on around us: by loving one another, all others, with the abiding love of God.

We have, for many centuries, portrayed the Ascension as a triumph, a victorious return to heaven, resplendent with rays of sunshine and power of the basic force of gravity. But in actuality, the Ascension is a threshold, not just for Jesus, but for us. It is an invitation to step into a whole new way of being in world, where we follow Jesus not with our eyes, but with the eyes of our hearts and with our lives. It's harder to see Someone that we can only follow with the guidance of the Spirit, but that is what we're being invited to do.

It seems to me that this Eastertide pointing so repeatedly to the Spirit is an affirmation of the recent turn our Futures Process took. It wasn't at all clear where we were, nor was it clear when we might know where we were going. Rather than seek out more advice, from sources that may or may not understand our situation, we committed to prayer. Because how can we follow Jesus without listening to the Spirit? How can we see Jesus without the prodding of the Spirit? How can we determine how to focus our love of one another without the guidance of the Spirit?

Have you found your prayer practice yet? Have you tried out some options? Have you found a prayer partner? There are lots of different ways to do it, and you don't have to stick to just one. Sometimes change is an event, a dramatic moment, but sometimes it's a season. And when transition settles in to stay for a while, it's vital that we remember the promise and the commandment: I am with you always. Love one another. The Spirit will show us the way. Hallelujah and Amen!