

Easter 7 / COVID-19 Week 11 / May 24, 2020

Focus: God is calling us into a new kind of normal.

Function: To inspire hearers to imagine what ministry in the new normal will look like.

Acts 1:6-14, John 17:1-11

Jesus knows how to make an exit, doesn't he? He makes a pithy parting word, and then is taken up into the clouds and out of the disciples' sight. It's like the end of some kind of classic movie where the hero gives a wry parting remark and then rides off into the sunset, the adoring friends transfixed on watching him go. But while an old movie would move on to the credits, our scene turns to the friends watching him go.

"They were gazing up toward heaven." I feel like this is the right place to use the word "gawk"—they were gawking at the heavens, staring, slack-jawed, filled with awe and wonder and confusion. Jesus, who had somehow undone the bonds of death, had been with them for forty days, teaching them and explaining things. Their rabbi, their friend, had broken bread with them, and passed through doors to get to them, and walked with them along the road. Now, suddenly, he was gone. And they watched where he went, as if by their force of will they could stare hard enough to bring him back to them.

But I think another thing was on their minds besides just getting their friend to get back down from the clouds and spend more time with them. That question they ask Jesus at the beginning—"is now the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"—it speaks volumes. After all this time with their rabbi, their friend, their Savior, they still think there is one thing missing from all the miracles and wonders and lessons he delivered. Israel, the chosen kingdom of God, still needed to be restored. Jesus still needed to sit on his throne in Jerusalem, and rule with justice and peace.

And maybe we laugh a little about that question. After all, the disciples are so obviously looking *backward* to a bygone glory days that has nothing to do with God's promised future.

Jesus wasn't going to take them back in time, returning them to what once was as if everything good that God could do was back in the past, in the mists of time, before the brokenness and sin of the present age. Jesus was calling them to the future!

We have the benefit of hindsight, so it can be easy for us to laugh at how the disciples had their hopes so wrongly fixed on that dusty old hope, but before we feel too good about ourselves, remember the scriptures. God's promise to Israel again and again is about a righteous king who would restore the kingdom and reign with justice. We hear it every year in Advent how the Lord will raise up a shoot from the stump of Jesse, a descendent of David who would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty Savior, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Israel was, after all, God's own chosen people. God had promised that the glory of the kingdom of David would be restored. It was the golden age that the disciples, and every Judean, wanted to go back to.

Longing to go back to a time when things were better doesn't sound so alien, I hope. And these days, we don't even have to look that far back—just a few months, really. Like the disciples waiting for the *real* initiation of the kingdom of God to start that would take them back to a golden past, we are eager for things like staying at home, closed stores, and social distancing to end so we can get back to normal. We long for this disruption to stop, for the world to get off the panic button, to live in a time when coronavirus wasn't a word we all knew.

But maybe we can take a cue from Jesus' response to the disciples. You know, the pithy line before he rode off into the sunset? "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. **But you will receive power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." It's not backward that we can find hope. It's forward. Forward, where Jesus

promises the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the commission to be witnesses to the end of the earth!

What is the world God is calling us to witness into? If Jesus' pushback to the disciples was that they needed to look forward, not backward, then what if God is calling us to look again at what we think we want? "Back to normal" is the phrase of the day lately, but is normal really what we want? Is "back to normal" really what God is calling us to find at the end of this pandemic?

After all, "normal" was a world where half of all Americans were one paycheck away from financial ruin. "Normal" was where partisanship was so intense we couldn't even agree on what a fact actually was. "Normal" was every weekend filled to the brim with activities, racing from practice to performance to game to tournament. "Normal" was a glimpse of our loved ones before they disappeared into the glow of their screen, or off to their second or third job, or behind a closed door. No, I don't think it's "normal" that we're longing for any more than the disciples were longing for the kingdom of David, with all its wars, palace intrigue, famine, and instability.

I think we long for the glimpses of the kingdom of God. We long to see our loved ones, to hug them and sit near them and talk to them without worrying about the risks. We long for fulfilling work, where we can put in honest labor to make the world a better place and go to bed feeling satisfied at what we've done. We long for goodness to be untethered from worry, so we can come up to someone who needs a helping hand rather than having to remember we need to keep six feet away. We long for the small things that show us the kingdom of God.

And we may long for that, but like Jesus said to the disciples, he says to us: it's not for us to know the times or the periods. We will be stuck in the wilderness for a while still. We may even have to stay in an upper room, quarantined just with people we are learning we know all too

well. But at the end of it is something spectacular. Because the disciples stayed in that upper room for ten days, praying and studying and spending time together while they waited (some things we could all do)—and then there was a sound like the rushing of the wind, and tongues of fire appeared.

Pause.

Siblings in Christ, we will come out of this pandemic to a changed world. One day in the future, I don't know when, we will emerge from our isolation to a world as rocked from its foundations as the world that reeled from the truth that the dead don't always stay dead. And when we emerge, when we come out of it with that word "normal" in our heads, maybe we should pause and ask ourselves: "is 'normal' what God wants us to return to? Or is it to something better?"

Let's follow the Spirit's call to witness to something new. Let's testify to a new normal where the small things aren't taken for granted, where we appreciate quality time with our families or seeing a church community beyond our walls. Let's make a new normal where the appreciation we've shown to so many essential people in our country—truck drivers, teachers, nurses, doctors, fast food workers, grocery store clerks, mail carriers, janitors, and all the forgotten ones—let's make a new normal where they are valued and supported and truly appreciated. Empowered by the Holy Spirit let's be witnesses to a new normal where the injustices of racism and sexism, appalling incoming inequality and pay-to-live healthcare, the valuing of certain lives more than others, are all jettisoned from society, never to return.

It was never normal we were longing for to begin with. It was never the kingdom of David that the disciples were hoping to return to. It was wholeness. It was community. It was the

fullness of God's justice and mercy and love. We were always longing for the kingdom. And now, with the leading of the Spirit, God is giving us an opportunity to proclaim it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.