

Ascension Sunday
Sermon 5.12.24

Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, ‘Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.’ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. (400)

The institutional church. Could there be a more oxymoronic phrase? Could there be anything more at cross-purposes with itself than the institutional church? If church is to be the fruit of the coming of the Spirit (which it is), if the church is to be the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, wild and free, and more crucially free-ing (which it is), could there be a less adequate response to its coming than to make an institution for it all? This is the thing that came into the world like wind, like fire! This is the aspect of God whose arrival was promised in vague terms and yet, once arrived, was unmistakable as the thing for which the apostles had been waiting. And the sign of its having come, the evidence, the effect: the church.

In 1902 there was a theologian and priest of the Catholic Church, Alfred Loisy who famously wrote, “Christ announced the Kingdom, and it was the church that came.” It’s sort of

like what people say now about the future as it was imagined in the past and is now our present: “We were promised flying cars and we got email and Angry Birds.” (Or fill in the blank with your least favorite “advancements.”)

Christ announced the Kingdom, and what we got was the church, is the church.

Loisy was excommunicated. Just sayin’.

To correct for this letdown, some iterations of church have decided to pare back the bureaucracy, to recover some of that direct experience. In fact, you could imagine the whole Protestant Reformation as an attempt at pruning, from Roman institutional proliferation to Anglican and Lutheran, to Presbyterian and Methodist, to Congregational and Anabaptist, to Quaker and Shaker. The vestments went from fancy to more plain to none at all, which isn’t to say the clergy were to be naked but that they were to be no more: no clergy, or any of the hierarchy that they represent. The sanctuaries likewise went from ornate to plain, in some cases eventually resembling little more than barns in a field. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. Covid Christmas Eve in the Sheep Barn at Gould Farm will probably go down as one of my favorite worship services ever.

It’s a cycle, really, a cyclical struggle. As each new iteration eventually becomes older and more entrenched, there recur new movements, even those now “that wish to get away from ‘institutionalized’ Christianity” and “look to the book of Acts for their inspiration.”

That’s C. Kevin Rowe writing there, our next author in Book Club. That is, in fact, a quote from the book, *Christianity’s Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope*. The back of the book declares its aim: “Human Life Is Just Too Hard to Have a Boring Christianity,” and he writes to have his readers experience the surprise that Christianity first was in the world. Bringing about three key conceptions, Christianity was at odds with so many cultural concepts otherwise at play. Rowe focuses a chapter on each: that Christianity was, and is, a story of everything, from beginning to end and beyond even these, every part and particle, every creature and every corner of the world, indeed even the world itself; that it imagined the human, each and everyone of us, as unique, deserving of dignity, and utterly beloved; and that it insisted upon institutions to manifest these new concepts—churches, hospitals, universities, care homes.

But the idea that institutions might be a part of it all falls afoul of our wide-spread distrust of such things, anything institutional. Recent, decades-long this even disdain pervades not least in regard to the church as an institution. The church, of course, sad to say, has given plenty of cause for such distrust, even disdain. We have time and again failed our mission in ways great and small,

tragic and ridiculous. It's all resulted in a persistent urge to deinstitutionalize even from within the church.

Writing of these current attempts, Rowe, a scholar of scripture whose area of expertise is the Book of Acts, sees how these attempts turn attention to Acts, the stories of the earliest iterations of church, as if in our origin is to be our current practice, not necessarily wrong-headed. "Their sense," he writes, "is that the Holy Spirit is poured out at Pentecost and the church follows the Spirit's prompting from then on and flourishes. Since the church was alive in the Spirit, there was no need for an institution. The community was led, it cohered, and it grew. Institutionalized religion is nowhere in sight, and had it come about, it would have stifled the Spirit's work."

But that understanding doesn't take a full account of what's remembered to have happened in the Book of Acts. Rowe admits, "There was real charisma at the beginning, but the origins of the church as institution actually lie with Jesus himself. Jesus chose twelve apostles to symbolize the ingathering of the twelve tribes of Israel... [Likewise,] After Jesus's resurrection, his followers saw the urgency of the symbol, and elected Mathias to fill Judas Iscariot's place."

That's the scene we heard just now, from the second reading of the morning, the reading from the book called the Acts of the Apostles.

The real church nerds among us will have noticed that the readings came in reverse order this morning. Usually, when we hear more than one reading from scripture, we hear the gospel reading last, the other reading first, whether a reading from one of the letters of the New Testament or one of the many, many books of the Old Testament. In short, the gospel reading is either the first and only, or the ultimate of two. That's my choice. As Congregationalists, we have a lot of discretion over how we conduct worship. We just don't have a lot of hierarchy, and thanks be to God for that. It's also in line with tradition: both how I grew up and what's typical in most churches: the gospel is the ultimate truth and so is the ultimate reading.

On Ascension Sunday, though, I often do the reverse. On Ascension Sunday, it's more often the case that the gospel reading comes first, the reading from the Acts of the Apostles comes last. This is to capture the chronology of the story. With the Ascension, first Jesus ascends, as remembered in the gospel reading from Luke, and then the apostles wait, as remembered in the book of Acts, a book by the same writer as the Gospel of Luke, a book likely to be taken in tandem, the gospel whose main character is Jesus and Acts whose main character is the Spirit, for whom the apostles are to wait, wait for the Spirit, promised to come, promised to come.

Ascension Day comes forty days after Easter, which is never a Sunday, is always a Thursday. But us of the lesser liturgical traditions nearly never meet for worship on Ascension Thursday. So, we're left to decide whether to remember *this* day as either the Seventh Sunday of Eastertide or as Ascension Sunday. Either way, a Sunday in wait.

The Gospel of Luke ends just as we heard a few moments ago: "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." And Acts begins with a quick summary of that scene, and then with the apostles returning "to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying."

We've spent a lot of time in this room lately. It's in remembrance of this room when we gather for communion, where Jesus was with his friends on the night of his arrest. Maundy Thursday recalls us to this room, the Thursday before Easter to reenact the Last Supper. The Sunday after Easter harks us back to this room, where the disciples have locked themselves away in fear and the risen Christ appears to them with this to say: "Peace be with you." So here we are again, and this time as if for a long time, for here the apostles would gather and wait, one hundred twenty in number, waiting for when the spirit would arrive, waiting, waiting for whatever that was and however that would feel and whenever that would happen. Here they would wait, for what would turn out to be ten days, from Ascension Day forty days after Easter to Pentecost fifty days after Easter. (More on that next week.)

And while they were waiting, they were constantly in prayer. They'd sing hymns. They'd break bread. Oh, and they would attend to this small bit of business. They'd cast lots to fill the vacancy among the twelve. Matthias. It would be Matthias, someone we've never heard of before and would never hear of again. His importance was, you might say, structural, institutional. They needed twelve, and he would make it twelve.

It's such a weird moment to be included here. It's such a weird moment for it being so mundane among all the out-of-this-world stuff going on. But it's like the apostles were bracing themselves for come-what-may, were making sound the structure for then the Spirit to come and to blow the doors off, if that's the sort of thing the Spirit does. (It is.)

Here's C. Kavin Rowe again: "As Acts tells it, not only did the earliest Christians begin their movement with ecclesial structure, they learned immediately that a lack of order did not mean freedom; it meant disorder. [For example] Early on, ...Greek-speaking widows were neglected

in favor of those who spoke Aramaic, the first language of Judea.” But then, upon giving voice to this injustice, some widows went to the Twelve and made their case, which resulted in an institutional change that made possible the church to be more even-handed in its offer of care. It took an institutional change to right this rather spontaneous wrong.

Indeed, “The early Christians...insisted that the revelation of the human required the development of institutions to sustain practices that kept the new vision of the human visible and alive in the world.” Rowe recognizes the essential relationship between this new notion that the Christ event introduced in the world, the human as deserving of dignity and needing of cultivation and development, and institutions that see to such cultivation and development. The human can only, or at least can best, become what we’re created to be if we have structures that see to that development, that cultivation.

I appreciate his recalling that to our minds. I appreciate his calling that to *my* mind. Our callous disregard for the institutions of our common life are a menace to us all but are mostly so to those already on the margins. I’ve had occasion recently to visit micro-cultures that are in collapse. I’m reporting back to this place of beautiful, calming, inspiring order to say they’re near impossible for those living amidst them to develop, to thrive.

Poverty is a trap out of which it’s near impossible to become free.

Ignorance, the not-knowing of one’s own mind amidst the world, becomes a state out of which it’s near impossible to grow and engage. When Covid had the public schools closed, it was poor kids who lost the most, missing free lunch, missing also the attention of that one teacher or guidance counselor or lunch lady or bus driver who sees you, who’ll catch you if you stumble.

Aging and unhealth can be tunnels to nowhere that darken and narrow, isolate and dehumanize.

Those who do manage the trick of thriving amidst otherwise collapse, like dandelions growing out of concrete, are made of stuff not everyone is made of, I imagine I am not made of and feel very grateful never to have been forced to test that suspicion of mine. Such fortitude, which I have not, is miraculous, admirable, but we shouldn’t structure our society with our fingers crossed that bootstraps might indeed be something you can pull yourself up with. (They’re not. This silly directive wasn’t intended to mean what it’s come to mean. It was, on the contrary, intended to give image to how absurd such an expectation is.)

The church, around here at least, isn’t what it once was. We, as members of and participants in this institution, are hardly up to the task of what we’re inspired and sent out to

address. There's so little we can do about making housing available to all who need it, whose dignity depends on it. There's so little we can do to open minds that are kept closed by crisis and constant worry. There's so little we can do to ease chronic pain that cripples people from living full and free lives. There's so little we can do about the so many problems that hobble human thriving which the revelation of God in Jesus would have us trust as the fullness of life that God intended from the beginning and that God will realize in the end—though meanwhile there's so little we can do.

There's so little we can do.

But this we can: open the doors, open them wide into this structure, into this structured and institutionally maintained place of calm, of order, of beauty, of peace. It's not everything. But it's not nothing. And it will do for now.

Thanks be to God.