

May 17, 2026
Easter 7 Sermon
St. John's Tappahannock
Rev. Nanette Woodworth
Acts 1:6-14 and John 17:1-11

This is the 7th Sunday in Easter, the last Sunday of this liturgical season.

The scriptures of Easter Season, both the readings from Acts and gospel reading from John, were chosen carefully to create an awareness of the fusion of the lives of the disciples in the Resurrected Jesus with our lives in Christ as well.

In our parallel gospel readings during Easter Season, in one way or another, the important teachings of Jesus to the disciples at the Last Supper in the gospel of John are repeated. All good teachers say the same thing in many ways. So we learned again, in the post-resurrection appearance stories, that Christ will be known in the breaking of the bread, that he will be seen when he calls those who love him by name, and that those who have not seen Him but believe are blessed. We were reminded that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, as the One through whom we know God the Father in this life, the Father who prepares a place for us in heaven. We were reminded that we are to love others and Jesus loves us, and that keeping the commandments is the way we show Jesus our love for him.

Our first reading today from Acts comes at the very beginning of this book which follows Luke (thematically) and traces the story of the Christian movement from the resurrection of Jesus to the leaders and relationships of the Jerusalem church to the three missionary journeys of Paul. The commentary in the Oxford Annotated Bible says that this gospel might appropriately have been titled, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit", since the main theme is the how the power of the Holy Spirit manifested in and through the members of the early church. It also says that the writer of Luke and Acts sought to inspire faith by showing the triumphs of the early church. He wanted Christians to be taken seriously, and to defend them against the charge that they were destructive of Jewish communities and troublemakers in the empire. **1**

Right before today's first reading in Acts, we are reminded that Jesus told his disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, characteristically pointing away from himself and to God the Father in all things. Jesus' famous words are a foreshadowing of the great commission, "For this is what you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

They continue in conversation and the disciples ask, "...Is this the time that you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" Jesus deflects their concern about the timing of His return, and keeps them focused on the concerns of *this* day. He promises once again that the Holy Spirit will empower them to go into the world, baptize and make disciples of all people, and then Jesus is lifted up.

The church celebrated this occasion, the Ascension, last Thursday. And the two angels remind all of us, tarry not gazing upon this mystical event, but now it is time to get to work. He reminds the disciples that Jesus will come again the same way in God's time, and that is not for us to know.

The very next thing that happens after today's reading is the return of the disciples to the upper room, among them women including Mary the mother of Jesus, to where they devoted themselves in prayer, no doubt to take pause and rest with all that has happened since the resurrection, before taking action.

Next we are among 120 believers and Peter stands up and reminds everyone that it was written in scripture (Psalms 109:8; Ps. 69:25) that another disciple is to be appointed to replace Judas. He must be someone who has, like the disciples, been among the closest followers of Jesus since John began baptizing, through the Ascension. Matthias is chosen by lots, deferring to God's will in all things.

Next week will continue this scripture with the Day of Pentecost reading to follow in Acts 2.

In today's gospel reading from John, we are back at the last Supper, and Jesus has just finished his quite lengthy and tender last teaching to his disciples (chap. 14-17), and he turns now to pray directly to God. There are three parts to this prayer.

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First he prays for himself, that his hour has come, and he has been perfectly obedient unto death, and in so doing, has secured eternal life for all people

through knowledge of God and his Son; and having finished the work, now awaits and therefore prays for his incarnate glory to be restored which he had in God's presence since before the creation existed. Remember the first verse of the gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Second, Jesus prays for his disciples who will be left in the world after his Ascension; that they may be one as are the Father and the Son; that they may have joy; that they may have protection (for Jesus knows all too well the inevitable challenges they will face and he truly worries about them); and he prays for them to be victorious over the evil one, and fulfill their mission of presenting Christ to the world. Thirdly Jesus prays for the church universal, that through the indwelling love of the Father and the Son She will fulfill God's will in the world. Jesus makes it very clear that he loves the disciples, that they believed everything he said, and he even prayed that eventually they will see Jesus again in his glory where he will be after the Ascension and was since the foundation of the world.

"The glory you gave to me, I have given to them, so that they may be one as we are one." I have always wondered what exactly this meant, (that we may be as one), because let's face it, we are a church that honors diversity of opinion and does not demand a unified front on any issue. I found this quote by church father Gregory of Nyssa to be very helpful.

(Gregory of Nyssa) – "Following his ascension, after conferring all power on his disciples, our Lord obtained many other gifts for them by his prayer to the Father. Among these was the greatest gift of all, which was that they were no longer to be divided in their judgment about what was right and good, because they were all to be united to the one Supreme Good who is God." This is what he meant when he said, "That they all may be one." **3**

So it helps me to remember how Jesus always acted out of his prayer time with God the Father. That is the way to be at one about things that fall under the category of the "Supreme Good" – if we pray for unity, we will act out of the prayerful desire to do the will of God in all things.

That does not mean that all issues are easily resolved, and sometimes we have to work through many conversations to arrive at the best course of action in any given situation. As we learned last week, it took over 60 years to resolve that the

Son of God and Holy Spirit are fully divine and of one substance with the Father at the Councils of Nicaea.

Gregory of Nyssa continues, "Now the bond that creates unity is glory. That the Holy Spirit is called glory no one can deny if one reflects upon our Lord's words: 'The glory you gave to me, I have given to them.' In fact, he gave this glory to his disciples when he said to them: 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' Although he had always possessed it, even before the world existed, our Lord received this glory when he put on human nature. Then, when his human nature had been glorified by the Spirit, the glory of the Spirit was passed on to all his brothers and sisters, beginning with his disciples." 4

So here we are, on May 17th, the Sunday between Ascension Day, and Pentecost. The glory may have been given to the disciples, but it seems to me, they were not feeling it quite yet.

We are no doubt able to imagine how the disciples' mood; since we are in an 'in between' time as well, we can relate. They were living between the memory of the Jesus of the past (who was their friend and rabbi, the Jewish Jesus who was the Messiah, foretold by the prophets, who came to bring in the Kingdom of God); the Jesus of the present (who is now in heaven), and the Jesus of the future (who will be with them going forward unto eternity through the Power of the Holy Spirit).

This is a classic example of what we call a liminal period. We are usually thrown into a liminal period. We do not usually seek them out. They seem unnatural. In all aspects of our individual and cultural lives, we favor the times when all seems to be going well – when we are in a groove - we like our job, when we are happily "relationshipped", when everyone in the family seems to be on a path that is satisfactory. Then something happens that throws everything askew. Like Jesus dying on the cross, for the disciples. Like seeing Him in his glory ascending into heaven, and then shuffling back to the upper room to do what there is sometimes the only thing to do – pray.

And then Peter in a surge of inspiration remembers the imperative to replace Judas. But now we are still between the Ascension and the being empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The word liminal comes from the Latin word limens which means "limit or threshold." Author and theologian Richard Rohr defines the liminal space that is experienced when we go through a significant transition this way: "It is when you have left, or are about to leave, the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to trust and wait, you will run. [you will do almost anything to avoid this terrible cloud of unknowing]." **4**

So what do we do during this liminal period, to in fact honor the time and make it useful?

According to Rohr there are two essential things that all people need when they find themselves in a liminal space: unconditional love and a supportive community. These two factors make all the difference in the midst of this vulnerable time. So this is a time to be sensitive to the needs of our neighbors, and to reach out. It is certainly not a time to be critical of our neighbors, but to build the beloved community rather than break it down. We all need to honor the space between no longer and not yet. We can do this by offering others, and ourselves unconditional love that is calming and stabilizing in the midst of this time of uncertainty.

As individuals, we need to learn to trust. We need to accept that there are times of life like this, and we can use them to reflect on our own spiritual lives. If we think about it as a gift of time, to look inside and tend our souls, this can be a time to practice forgiveness, to work on our own sense of purpose, to figure out what is unsettled within us and begin to settle it. It is a time to find inspiration and creativity to apply to the new time that we will eventually find. It is a time to look for ways to be there for each other, and bring everything into a healthier balance.

Conclusion

It is time to recover and refresh and restart and reawaken and to retake up the hard work and unshirkable responsibilities of making the world anew.

God chose us to be the light to all nations. Let's find ways to move closer to what is important, essential. Only time can tell what fruits such a focus on the

essential will bear. Let us learn to appreciate our relationships with the earth and each other and to tend to them. The Pentecost season is also called Ordinary time. Often it is living into the sacredness of the every day, that will make the biggest difference, that will build beloved community. Just the regular days that make up most of our lives. That is hard enough. Besides, not to worry, Jesus said, he will send the Holy Spirit to help us in all things, great and small.

I close with a poem for the Ascension from Jan Richardson's book Circle of Grace, A Book of Blessings for the Seasons. 5

“In the Leaving”

In the leaving,
In the letting go,
Let there be this
To hold on to at the last:
the enduring of love,
the persisting of hope,
the remembering of joy,

the offering of gratitude,
the receiving of grace,
the blessing of peace.
Amen.

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Resources

1. Metzger, Bruce M. and Murphy, Rolan E., editors; The NRSV Oxford Annotated Bible; Oxford University Press; New York; p. 160 NT
2. Ibid.; p. 152 NT
3. Elowsky, Joel C. and Oden, Thomas C.; Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture; Intervarsity Press; Downers Grove; Illinois; 2007; p. 258
4. Ibid.
5. Rohr, Richard; Falling Upward – Spirituality in the Two Halves of Life; Josey Bass – A Wiley Imprint; San Francisco, CA; 2011; p. 50, 171-172
6. Richardson, Jan; *In the Leaving*; Circle of Grace, A Book of Blessings for the Seasons; Wanton Gospeller Press; Orlando Florida; 2015; p. 166