

Yr. A, Easter 7
May 31, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1489 Words

Lessons: Acts 1:6-14
Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36
1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11
John 17:1-11

When the county workers finished pouring the sidewalk along the Denmark Highway, my mom finally let me ride my bicycle all the way to town. It took 20 minutes from my house, peddling non-stop, to reach the soda fountain at Best's Drug Store on the city circle. Usually, it took longer because of all the distractions along the way—journeys were never intended to be straight lines without interruptions.

So, when the apostles' earthly journey with Jesus was about to be interrupted, there was one burning question on their minds, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

It had been just forty days since their bewildering discovery of Jesus' resurrection. Their lives were completely, profoundly transformed by a new and better pathway, and yet their minds were still fixed on that traditional idea that the kingdom of Israel should be free of gentile domination by Rome.

As we heard a moment ago, Jesus listens patiently to their question about timing, and then responds in his usual, pastoral manner by saying, "It's none of your business."

Oh, how we want to know the timing of things—is this when we get to go back to normal, is this when we can leave quarantine behind? It reminds me of that traditional question coming from the back of the station wagon—the *quintessential* question about timing—"Are we there yet?"

It is so hard to accept *not knowing* where we are on our journey. It's hard to accept the fact that journeys were never *intended* to be straight lines without interruptions.

Notice how Jesus does *not* promise his followers knowledge. Instead, he promises they will receive power—and not just *any power*, but the power of God's own Holy Spirit. Let me ask *you*, "What *more* could you ask for?"

And so, on this 43rd day of the Easter Season we pray, "O God, do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us..." Forty days into the miracle of resurrection life we celebrate Jesus' ascension to heaven. It is a celebration that is both wonderful *and* unsettling. After all, we don't like feeling left behind on our journey...with all of our uncertainties.

Whenever I am tempted to host a little 'pity party,' I will generally say, "You know, this is not what I signed up for...preaching toward a cell phone...pronouncing a blessing at an iPad...not being able to celebrate Holy Eucharist and Baptism with my congregation...not being able to hug my people at the door on Sunday morning."

You see, I can hear myself sounding like those apostles, standing there with Jesus on the mountain outside Jerusalem. They just want to know, "Is this the time when you are going to make everything better?" *We* just want to know, "Is this the time when God will make everything better?" "Are we there yet?"

The pastoral Word of the Lord still replies, "It is not for *you* to know the times...it's none of your business." And so, we pray, "O God, do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us..."

About half way between Galilee Road (where I lived) and the soda fountain on the Barnwell Circle, there were a dozen or so houses along a curve in the highway—mostly small and in very poor condition. Shingles were missing from some of the roofs, and front porches were sagging on some of the houses.

In the front yards of several of those houses, though, you would see an *ocean* of hydrangea blossoms. In the springtime, during the weeks between Easter Day and Ascension Day, the most glorious outpouring of baby blue and pink flowers would erupt in front of those houses. There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of flowers, some as big as volleyballs, swaying in the breeze. Sometimes I would hit the brakes on my bike, and stop on the sidewalk long enough to take it in. When you're a kid, hydrangeas are as magically colorful, big, and soft as cotton candy.

What has hitting the brakes and stopping enabled *you* to see this spring? What glorious outpouring have you witnessed during these weeks between Easter Day and Ascension Day? There are a lot of people, places, and things that we *fail to notice* at full speed. There is a lot of beauty to behold that we miss if we *think* our journey is supposed to be a straight line without interruptions.

One of our parishioners gave voice to our grief the other day on one our 'Thankful Thursday' video conferences. She said, "The way I identify myself is not being fulfilled right now." She's right. For many of us, our vocations and—*more importantly*—our connections with other people have been emptied out to some degree.

It is easy to feel *not only* as if our journey has taken an unwanted detour, but also as if we have been emptied of some of our favorite people, places, and things. Be careful how you manage this emptiness. Be very careful not to fill it with harmful substitutes of lesser value. Remember that this detour, this interruption, is *part* of your journey. You are being presented with the chance to witness outpourings you otherwise might have missed. You are being blessed with an opportunity to notice beauty you otherwise might have overlooked at full speed.

Forty years later, I am blessed with a window through which I get to look on Tuesdays for *hours at a time*. Right now, during this Ascension tide, there is a most glorious outpouring of baby blue hydrangea blossoms on the other side of the glass. If you slow down and stop long enough to pay careful attention, *you'll* discover how the hydrangea flower got its name. In the midst of these beautiful blossoms there are lots of small seed capsules, perfectly formed to hold water. They are, literally, water vessels. The Greek word for water is 'hydra'...the Greek word for vessel is 'angeion.' Water...Vessel—hydra...angea.

The Good News on the 7th Sunday of Easter is that **you** are perfectly formed hydrangea—*perfectly formed water vessels* which can never be emptied of the blessings received in the waters of Holy Baptism. You may feel 'emptied out' or unfulfilled because of the deprivation we are experiencing in this time of separation, but you can trust the shape of your glorious hydrangea life.

The very last promise Jesus makes to his followers right before his ascension is not that they would be *filled* with knowledge, which—after all—is passing. What Jesus promises is that we will be filled with power, and not just any power...but the power of God's *own* Holy Spirit. It turns out that our hydrangea-shaped lives are perfectly formed vessels, not only for the waters of Baptism, but also for the *power* of the Holy Spirit.

It is *with this power* that we are able to trust the words St. Peter shared with the Church in those early days of uncertainty, when he and the other apostles had to find their way along a *winding journey* filled with interruptions. His words seem quite applicable to us right now. So, I will read them for you again:

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the...ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings."

You see, as St. Paul taught us, "Jesus Christ, though he was in the (perfectly shaped) form of God, he did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but—*wait for it*—he emptied himself!" Christ chose the deprivation of *being emptied* in order to pour out for us the glorious blessings *and power* of a loving God.

Now we can return our attention to the words from St. Peter's *very timely letter* to the Church, in which he writes: "Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Resist the Adversary, (the deceiver). Remain steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. The God of all grace...will *himself* restore, support, strengthen, and establish you."

So, in this time of trial, when we pray, "O God, do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us..." we can rest assured that in spite of the detours and interruptions on our journey, we are being further shaped and developed as vessels in order to receive the power of the Holy Spirit; and, therefore, to become even better equipped to *share* the outpouring of this special gift with others.

So, slow down, stop, and behold the glorious beauty of your hydrangea-shaped life...created, redeemed, and sustained for the glory of God, and for the *glorious outpouring* of God's blessings for your neighbors, now and forever.

Amen.