

**“FINDING OUR OWN WAY”**

**Luke 24:44-55; Acts 1:1-11**

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The scripture tells us that they watched him ascend into heaven, and the crowd of disciples standing there remained looking upwards waiting, wanting for Jesus to come back to them. But he never did, and in that moment, the first era of the church's history was over.

We don't know if the story of Jesus' ascension is factual, if some group of people really did see the Risen Christ disappear from the earth one day. But the story is certainly true: true in the sense that it tells us something important about the church's life. For some time after Easter morning, the gospels record that it was not uncommon for believers to see, to talk with, to touch the One who had died and was alive again. He was among them, with them, the same and yet radically changed. The experience of that resurrected presence in the early days changed lives and hearts. It turned cowards into heroes, simple fishermen into great preachers, and gathered men and women of all walks of life into community together.

But that time in the life of the church somehow ended abruptly. No more could doubting followers touch the marks of the nails, or listen as He walked with them down a road, opening the scriptures to them. Now it was up to the disciples to tell the Jesus story unaided. And when questions came up about the right ordering of the community of believers, the community was on its own. After the ascension, for the first time, the early Christians had to rely not on their crucified and risen savior for answers, but on themselves.

It is the single most important transition of Christianity, the moment when former disciples now became leaders, and the stripling church took upon its own shoulders the development and interpretation of its faith. I have to say that I'm not entirely sure this was one of God's best ideas. I think it would be wonderful to still have the risen Christ hanging around on a daily basis in the church. It would certainly boost attendance. It would give us certainty. But the best thing about having the Risen Christ around would be that we could ask him our questions. All of our questions. Did you really walk on water? How did you do it? Does it matter if we baptize infants or adults? Does it matter if we believe in the Virgin Birth? What do you, Risen Christ, think about worship and sacraments, about homosexuality, gay marriage, abortion, divorce, Buddhists and Muslims, and, while we're at it, United States foreign policy? Would you have fought against Hitler in World War II? Why didn't God stop the Holocaust? What do you have to say about the current war in Iraq?

Wouldn't it be nice to have answers to those questions, answers we could trust, answers we knew absolutely to be right? But we don't. The watershed of the ascension means that for two millennia now, the church of Jesus Christ has been given into the hands of Christ's people, and the church will go where its people lead. It's a scary thought. And one place it leads us is to all the errors the Church and church people have made throughout history, all the wrong turns of doctrine and intention. In two thousand years, Christians have brought us the Crusades, the Inquisition, anti-Semitic pogroms, unholy alliances between religion and political power, greed

in the name of the church, bigotry in the name of the church, self-hating theology in the name of the church. The list is long and it should be troublesome to Christians.

But I would put up alongside it another list: a list of reformation after reformation; poor people fed and given work; hospitals started and the old and sick tended; schools begun, books collected and carefully copied; abuses of power denounced; resistance movements aided and abetted; acts of generosity and selflessness; the daily piety, charity, and goodness of millions. God having given the life and course of the church into human hands, I am less shocked that terrible things have been preached and permitted in Christian life than I am amazed and hopeful that even after all this time, all these movements, all the splintering, divisiveness, and human frailty of the church, still - miraculously - the center holds. Still, around the world, the gospel of self-giving love is preached and the Risen Christ is given flesh over and over again in his body, which is the church. Think about that for a moment. Think of how many generations have lived since Jesus with such different concerns and life situations. Then imagine how far the church could have strayed in those 2000 years from its core beliefs and concerns. Again, I'm not trying to whitewash the church past or present, but it could be a whole lot worse.

The church has survived relatively intact, I am sure, because of the diversity of voices that have been raised through the generations. In Adult Confirmation class, we have just covered the history of the Christian church in three classes, which meant an absurdly quick trip through 2000 years of experience. But quick though our survey might have been, it doesn't take long to realize that the church has never been either unified or quiescent. Always the church has had raised both majority and minority voices, articulating different visions of who God calls us to be and where to go in any time and place.

And I say all this because, in these days, I think a lot of us look around the American churches in particular and are disheartened by the deep theological divisions between liberal and conservative churches. We and those other Christians pray and study and read our Bibles and we come to entirely opposite conclusions on issues of importance. It's easy to be disquieted by that, partly because it is intellectually troubling that we look at the same "data" if you will and come to such different conclusions, and also partly, if we are honest, because the other side seems to have more support than we do, more power than we have. The conservative Christian movement in the last quarter of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries is one of the most successful grass-roots social and political movements in American history, and we longtime mainline Christians don't much like having been sidelined by it.

However, I would contend that this is a potentially fruitful time in the life of the church. If we look at history, it is moments like this, with strong majority and minority opinions, when creative change occurs. Of course, the catch is that we have to talk to each other. To be honest, I am less troubled by the theological differences within the Christian church, or our minority status, than I am by the lack of conversation between liberal and conservative churches. It is almost non-existent. In Corvallis, there are two distinct clergy groups that meet and work together: the evangelical clergy and the rest of us. I don't even know the names of the pastors of the conservative churches in town. And that's pretty typical not just of local church situations, but of churches at all levels. We have allowed ourselves to become polarized in our differences,

forgetting the church's long important tradition of respectful disagreement, forgetting what we hold in common, forgetting that Christ calls all Christians to be his body together.

What has kept the church from going completely off course over the 2000 years it has been left in our hands has been the conversation of devoted church people who disagreed about matters of theology and right action. And so we need to find ways to talk with Christians from whom we are divided. We need to believe that they have as much to teach us as we would like to think we have to teach them. We of the United Church of Christ, in particular - we who claim to celebrate diversity - it is our mission to build the bridges that lead to such conversation.

Jesus is no longer with us as he was in the early church. We, the disciples have become the leaders, and must find our way through the issues that face the church in our age. So let us tend the church; let us create the conversations that engage the issues that keep our beloved church close to its center. Thanks be to God. Amen.