

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Sending Out Doves

Act 1:1-11

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In times of great uncertainty, we need something we can trust. We look for something certain, something immovable, something solid when everything else is changing all around us. Riding in a moving car and getting car sick: we fix our eyes on the horizon. Picking your way through a moving stream wearing a heavy backpack: we move one foot at a time, find solid footing and then move your weight. Trying to get the nerve to ask for a date . . .you move one foot at a time, find solid footing and then move the conversation ever so slightly. At least that was my game. I didn't have much game. But I did know what it was like to seek solid ground. Every Texas kid knows what it's like to be shaken awake at 3 in the morning and told to get in the closet or in the bathtub. A twister may be coming so get yourself into the most solid place you can find. When things are uncertain, we look for something to hold on to. We look for anything to reassure us, any news of something that's going to break through the uncertainty.

This, too, is an uncertain time as the community begins to slowly poke its head out the door to see if its ok to go outside. Uncertainty is usually coupled with waiting, with wondering, with hoping, but not being sure hopes are going to be fulfilled and from what direction.

After Easter the disciples are in a state of waiting and questioning. What they know of the resurrection is the source of their hope and their yearning. They want Christ to fulfill the promise of restoration, to finish the good work began in them and by him in the world. When, where, they ask? When is a question that erupts in uncertainty: When will these things be? When will we find solid ground? After all they've been through until this point, their reward: more uncertainty. Jesus, who they thought was on the cusp of glory, departs from their presence and disappears. The Ascension.

It had been 40 days since the resurrection. Forty and its multipliers are biblical grammar for a long time, usually of suffering, which is followed by a breakthrough into a new way of being. The Israelites spent 400 years in Egypt and then 40 years in the wilderness after the parting of the Red Sea. Jesus was in the wilderness fasting for 40 days, and the Great flood lasted 40 days and 40 nights. Then The rains stopped and the waters started to abate and Noah's Ark hit ground. After another 40 days, Noah released a raven and then a dove, discovering by them that it was still not safe to return to rebuilding life on earth until another dove flew away and did not return.

One of you reminded me recently that the word quarantine, a word we've come to know well, is from the Latin for 40 and has echoes of Noah and his Ark. The word comes from Italy during the time of the Black Plague when ships coming to shore were kept in isolation for 40 days before being declared disease free. They were quarantined. Forty is a powerful number. One of you wrote me early Easter Sunday morning of our quarantine,

“This Sunday, we worship the resurrection of Christ. We come out of the forty days of Lent and into another 40-day cycle - the number of days from resurrection to ascension. This Sunday, it’s like we’re all in the ark after the flood, and we’ve received the olive branch from the dove; but we still don’t know if it’s safe to re-enter the world. Perhaps by Ascension Day, when the dove has flown away, we’ll know.”

This past Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension. Forty days since Easter. So . . .do we know yet? Has the dove flown away? Is it safe to re-enter the world? These are questions we have in these days, answered by some with wide-eyed fear, others with gritted teeth and snarled lips. But do we really know? The floodwaters do seem to have begun to recede, but now what? And When? When and where is still the question. Though waters appear to have begun to recede, what has taken its place is fathoms of uncertainty. You can drown in uncertainty, too.

Living through quarantine brings these biblical stories of 40 to the forefront, Noah’s waiting, Israel’s Exodus, Jesus’ wilderness, and the disciples’ bewilderment at the Ascension. In every other instance of the great 40, something good happened at the end, a breakthrough to end suffering and uncertainty: dry land, promised land, Jesus’ ministry. At the Ascension, at least as it appeared at first, the exact opposite had happened. They went from having the resurrected Jesus with them—a delightful certainty of God’s power and presence-- to seeing Jesus depart—and leaving behind so many questions. He wasn’t restoring the kingdom to Israel as they’d asked. He left them with the cryptic, “it’s not for you to know the times or the seasons.” And then, he left. Forty short days after resurrection, he left them; he left us—humanity--all alone with our questions and our uncertainties. Or did he?

Karl Barth once described the period between ascension and Pentecost as a ‘significant pause’ in the mighty works of God, a pause in which the church’s task is to work and pray. And good on the disciples for doing what they did. Once they overcame the startling shock of Jesus’ departure they returned to the upper room in Jerusalem and devoted themselves to prayer. The uncertainty didn’t derail them or immobilize them, it deepened them. “Now they wait as those who are still dependent on the Father’s faithfulness, those who have no illusion of control over the timetable of a beneficent God who graciously allows enough time to accomplish the work begun in Jesus.”

They had been changed by everything they’d gone through. This time, in the upper room, the circle had grown wider. The disciples were there after the ascension, now, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus. Jesus’ departure had already widened the circle toward a fuller, richer community of friends on earth. This community of friends, in the words of Will Willimon, was not to be a memorial society for a dead Jesus. The Church doesn’t just live in the past tense. The Church is alive to the present moment it inhabits. Every moment can be a teacher of new lessons and new ways of loving and knowing God.

They experienced the moments after Jesus’ ascension as the ultimate uncertainty, but what felt at first like uncertainty was the promise of great certainty—ultimate certainty. To ascend was to go to God. Jesus was going to God. When we confess the Creed, we confess He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God.

The Apostle's Creed shows us the way. Remember the Creed?

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day, he rose again.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

All the past tense words stack up in the 2nd article in the creed: *conceived, born, suffered, crucified, died, buried, descended, rose, ascended*. Note the change now: *is seated*. Would you just say that quietly with me now: *is seated*.

He ascended and is seated at the right hand of the Father. The right hand of the Father is the place of power and honor. At the Ascension, the past tense makes way for the present. The Ascension is the clear establishment of the Lordship of Christ, the rule of his ongoing life over all creation. Christ sits on the throne of glory. The arc that began at Christmas with "I bring you good news . . . a savior who is Christ the Lord." The arc whose apex is Easter, "I tell you he is not here he is risen." The arc comes to its end today at Ascension.

The ascension looks like the ultimate reason for uncertainty, but it is, in truth, the greatest gift of certain hope. Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, of space and time, of then and now, of the past, the future, and the present moment.

I want to share with you another excerpt from the Easter morning letter from one of you that spoke so meaningfully to me, on a morning when I was down about our inability to gather for worship that morning—on Easter. This, again is from early Easter morning while it was still dark:

"It feels meaningful to be in quarantine, actively participating in this cycle of quarantines. I know you grieve our separation. I do, too. But what an opportunity; it is so rare in our generally comfortable lives to feel the cycles that the patriarchs of our faith experienced firsthand. The uncertainties, the reality of our mortality, the concern for our families and friends and neighbors, and our insignificance before the awesome forces of nature and time. And our complete and utter dependence on a Good and Loving God. These things are always there, and our lack of perceiving them in comfortable times is a delusion, but in crisis, it is a gift to be connected even though we are separated spatially (us, now, in social distancing) and temporally (us, now, from our forebears)."

Yes, and what has changed since then, in these last 40 days, is that we're starting to send out doves to see if it's safe to step out of the ark. What has not changed is that though we are separated from one another spatially and temporally, Jesus Christ is Lord of space and time and, we are each bound up with him together in the great Communion of Saints made one in the living Lord of all. Our waiting is not empty handed. We wait in hope as those who know that

our Lord has been taken up and is exalted at the right hand of God. When we speak of God, we must speak of Christ because Christ now reigns with God. The one who served, taught, and loved us now rules for us all with wounds still in his hands and his feet.

This is the time of the church's prayer and work through our wounds and in our glory, in the one thing we can be sure of in the face of whatever uncertainties we face: he is Lord. May it ever be so—it will ever be so, until the day of his glorious return.

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