

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Ascension Sunday, May 24, 2020
Luke 24:44-53
Change of Heart? By Rev. Sue Trigger

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON Luke 24:44-53 (CEB*) Hank Peck, Confirmand

4 Jesus 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 from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” **45** Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. **46** He said to them, “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, **47** and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. **48** You are witnesses of these things. **49** Look, I’m sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power.” **50** He led them out as far as Bethany, where he lifted his hands and blessed them. **51** As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. **52** They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. **53** And they were continuously in the temple praising God.

What a week it has been! I can’t remember a time in my lifetime when there has been so much conversation about church on every level of government. In an era when churches have been in decline, suddenly worship has become essential. I have to say that I appreciate the sentiment. Worship *is* an essential part of our faith. As Presbyterians, we say that worship is where we offer ourselves to God and are equipped for service. Perhaps one of the blessings that may come out of the pandemic is a greater appreciation of the church and the importance of faith in our daily lives. I will live in hope.

For the last three months the church and pandemic have been in the news often. Pastors have struggled with what it means to be the church at a time when the best course of action is for people to stay home. Some pastors have felt that not being allowed to gather for worship has infringed on constitutional rights. Others have felt that the greatest witness to our faith is to protect each other by staying apart. This struggle has captured the attention of state and federal legislators and even the President. Who would have imagined that a pandemic would cause the church to wrestle with what it means to be the church? And yet here we are. It’s an important conversation that I am glad we are having.

The first thing I want to offer to you is a statement by Jeanne Radak, a Presbytery executive who wrote in her blog, “Let’s remember that the church doesn’t need to “reopen”. **We never closed.** We have been faithfully gathering online or on the phone to worship, pray, decide and learn. Many have ramped up their missions and ministries or started new projects in response to the needs in their communities and neighborhoods. Pastors, Elders, Deacons and members have connected, virtually visited and cared for the sick,

dying and those grieving. We are not closed. We have faced the challenge straight on and adapted. What we are seeking is the best way to reenter and gather in our buildings. We crave being able to see each other face to face but we have to be able to do that safely and without fear of infection.”ⁱ

Jeanne’s words express well the perspective of the Presbyterian Church (USA). That is the reason that we are not worshipping in person today, and are carefully working out how and when we will reenter and gather in person. In the meantime, we can continue the conversation about what it means to be a community of faith at this moment. What does it mean to be a witness when we are asked to stay at home and in small groups as much as possible?

While this seems unprecedented for us, it is not the first time that believers have faced this dilemma. There are plenty of Biblical examples of times when people were isolated and unable to practice their faith normally. The stories of exile in the Old Testament are filled with that struggle. During times of exile, the Hebrews were taken from their homeland into foreign nations like Assyria, Persia and Babylon. They were slaves in lands that did not know the faith of Abraham and Moses. Some nations did not allow them to gather to worship together, certainly not in a house of worship. This was compounded by a belief that worship was something that was done in community and in the house of God. They had lost their community, and the house of God was back home in Jerusalem. The prophets wrestled with how to hold onto faith when life was uncertain. Some grew to believe that God traveled with them wherever they were and could be worshipped from anyplace. Others believed that the purity of worship was paramount and only worship in the temple was honorable in the sight of God. Isn’t it interesting that these are the very same perspectives Christians are struggling with today? Those who believe that we can worship God online from our separate homes, and those who believe that worship in the house of God is what is right. I would like to tell you that the prophets worked it all out and have a definitive answer, but even if they did, we would have to factor in what Jesus had to say about the issue.

What did Jesus say about worship? It’s hard to say exactly. We know that Jesus was an observant Jew. He went to the temple for festivals and observances. We know that as a young man, he went to the temple to learn from the rabbis. It is believed that Jesus was a regular at the Synagogue in Nazareth where he was raised. It was there that he announced the beginning of his ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah and claiming that on that day the Scripture was fulfilled. His friends and neighbors were the ones who nearly ran him off a cliff. But Jesus also taught and prayed on hillsides and plains, even on water. He often went off alone to be in solitude so that he could meditate and find rest in the presence of God. Here’s a question to ponder, when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, did he believe that he was conducting worship? We don’t know. The

gospels don't give us a definitive answer as to whether Jesus believed worship must be in the temple, or whether it could be wherever people gather. His example indicates some flexibility. It just may be that *where* the community gathered was not as important to Jesus as *why*.

Today is Ascension Sunday. It is the day when we recall the end of Jesus' time on earth after his resurrection. His final words to his disciples give us an indication of what was most important to him. "4 Jesus 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 from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. 46 He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 *and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations*, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49'

If we wanted to summarize the life and teachings of Jesus, this would be a good place to begin. If we wanted to define "Good News" this would be an excellent definition—"the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, *and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins* must be preached in his name to all nations." What a life giving message of hope! When Jesus calls on us to be his witnesses, he asks us to share his story of Good news. But not only his story, but *our* story of how our lives have been changed for good, how our hope is in knowing Christ.

Unfortunately, time has shifted the focus for Christians. Today, some Christians believe that being a witness means telling others what they have to disavow. For example, "To be a Christian you have to disavow drinking alcohol." Some believe that the good news is a message of personal salvation that encourages a private spirituality that is focused on an inward journey rather than a visibly transformed life. Sometimes what you hear from a "witness" is not what they love about their faith, but instead what they think is wrong with yours. Still other Christian witness involves pushing conformity to particular ideas, practices, and beliefs. For example, worship must be held in a sanctuary to be authentic.

These forms of witness are what make people uncomfortable about evangelism. The Rev. Lindsay Armstrong, Executive Director of New Church Development in the Greater Atlanta Presbytery wrote about these forms of witness saying, "Witness starts to feel like an effort to make another person change. Such witness misses the mark when we do not share what is life-giving or hopeful about what we have found in Jesus, but instead simply warn others about continuing down their current paths." She continues saying, Today's "witness

is about responsive conversation rather than a fixed message. Such witness seeks conversation and connections between life experience and the gospel.”ⁱⁱ

Today, as we remember the ascension of Jesus, I invite you to think about how you can be a life giving witness. Consider your faith story and how you might be able to share a message of comfort or support for someone who is grieving or feeling insecure right now. When you share your story, focus on the things Jesus said were most important. “The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, *and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins* must be preached in his name to all nations.” In other words, tell your story. How has your life been changed because of your faith? How can you share that in a way that brings life and hope to someone else?

In this moment of an epic pandemic we all need to hear a life giving message. People are hungry for meaning in a world that doesn’t make sense. I hope you remember that it is not up to us to “convert” anyone. We are free simply to *join* in God’s work, sharing our own experiences and asking others about theirs. Sharing the good news is a relational conversation that makes connections between our lived experience and the message of the gospel.

Lori Flick walked into Columbia Presbyterian Church in south-central Pennsylvania almost seven years ago and found a place of refuge. “I think a lot of people were like ‘Who is this girl?’” she said. “I was skinny as heck. I looked like I was ready to rob the place,” but “I just got to know everyone. They gave me hope. They gave me Jesus. They gave me my self-worth when I didn’t have it.”

Today, she’s a driving force behind the church’s food ministry. Hands Across the Street fights hunger in Lancaster County and other nearby areas. Flick is one of a half-dozen people keeping the food ministry going during the pandemic. Several times a week, she visits stores to say, “Hey, do you have any donations?” “We get random stuff and we’ll just bag it.” she said. They share the food at weekly Food Giveaways. Flick said the giveaways are an opportunity to not only provide food but “to talk to them, to see where they are”.

She, personally, needed a lifeline when she first arrived at the church nearly seven years ago and tries to share what she received from the church members. “All of the food, all the outreach, all of it comes from a compassionate heart for those that are broken,” Flick said. “We just want to heal the hurts, so people can be whole and heal and don’t have to repeat cycles. This church showed me that.”ⁱⁱⁱ

That's what it looks like to share a story of a changed heart. Certainly it can happen when we gather in a building, but it may happen even more effectively when God tugs on your heart to share your story with a friend or a stranger. It can happen in a Zoom meeting; it can happen by phone. It can happen in an email, a text or a post. It can happen anytime. It can happen anyplace. It can happen in a letter; it can happen face to face. Wherever a life giving story is found, a story of a life whose change is profound; it's a story of hope, it's a story of love. God's will done on earth as it is up above.

ⁱ Radak, Rev. Jeanne, <https://newtonpresbytery.org/2020/05/23/should-we-reopen/>

ⁱⁱ LINDSAY P. ARMSTRONG, Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, Carolyn J. Sharp. Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship (Kindle Location 9776). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carter, Darla, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/food-rescue-operations-are-vital-during-a-pandemic/>, Presbyterian News Agency, May 21, 2020.