

*Based on Luke 24:49-53. Jesus Ascends Into Heaven*

*They were continually in the temple blessing God.* Luke's version of *they all lived happily ever after*. Even as Jesus really was leaving them. For good this time. And they really would now have to figure out how to do their ministry without him.

In the Protestant Church we forget this, I have found. That the risen Christ appears to the disciples for a full *forty days* after the resurrection, and not just the one that has an Easter bunny attached to it.

For forty days, the risen Christ teaches and heals a community that has been truly plunged into crisis after the chaos of the crucifixion. For forty days he binds that beloved community back together again around a common vision and values and a clear set of priorities. To the point that when he finally does leave them—for real this time—they are so carried away with the blessing of God and of one another, and they are so carried away with his promise that the Holy Spirit will come and guide them in his absence, that they barely even notice he has gone.

Forty days is, in biblical numerology, a number that signifies completion, rather than a precise count of sunrises following sunsets. Forty days means the risen Christ takes as long as it takes *to get the job done*.

The ancient Hebrews, we recall, wander in the wilderness for forty years before entering the land of promise and plenty. Jesus spends forty days in the desert in preparation for his own ministry of proclaiming the kingdom in the face of Roman occupation. And here the risen Christ spends another forty days among his closest companions to re-form them as an Easter community that bears witness to the power of God to make good from even the worst a community can endure. And then to move on.

The forty days of the season of Easter simply means that they—and we—take the time we need to get ready for what is coming next. To let go of the life to which we can no longer return in order to embrace the life that is yet to come.

Which is what we at SPC have been doing through these first three and a half years of our ministry together, with COVID as an exclamation point. Trusting the healing grace of God in the midst of crisis. Letting go of what can no longer be the life of this community. And preparing to embrace the life that is yet to come.

Here we are on “Ascension Sunday” celebrating in our Scriptures that the risen Christ is flying away to that home on God's celestial shore. With a promise that the Holy Spirit will come and guide us in his absence.

The healing is complete. The disciples who love Jesus so very much are blessing him, as he is blessing them. They rush back to downtown Jerusalem with great joy. And they are continually in the temple blessing God, just as we are continually coming home here to SPC, to bless God and to be blessed by God over and over and over again.

Throughout this symbolic forty days of COVID ministry, what we have found is that this congregation really is, as we say in our identity statement “an inclusive spiritual community ... welcoming all who long for meaning, hope, and belonging.” That part of who we are will never change.

Other parts have changed, some by necessity and some by choice.

Your Session—having labored for what I am sure has felt more like forty years than just three—has taken this time of COVID-enforced introspection to carefully review everything this congregation said was important, from the time my predecessor (Randy Tremba) announced his retirement until the moment I arrived as your new pastor.

We have probed the SPC identity statement, seeking new insight from an already-established vision. We have revisited the Congregational Assessment Tool and the commitments to Radical Hospitality, Holistic Spirituality, and Engaged Compassion the congregation declared as its priorities. We have assessed strategic issues facing the congregation compiled by the Strategic Issues Team.

We noted great enthusiasm documented by the Congregational Assessment Tool in areas of Welcome, Worship, Youth, and Sunday Seminar. We lifted up the goals of developing ministries that work toward healing the broken, expanding outreach toward the margins of society, and strengthening lay leadership. We wrestled with recommendations to revisit our staffing rationale, with a reminder that a congregation our size lives with a so-called “staffing paradox”: we need more staff but we do not have the resources to provide for that staff, even as we seek to build the church for the future.

Through this season of COVID-enforced introspection, the session has made spirit-led strategic decisions to lay the foundation for that church of the future: investing in two new positions to provide tech support for live-streaming our worship and to coordinate ministry with children and youth. The session has also discerned a commitment to giving at least ten percent of the church budget to mission and advocacy projects beyond the congregation. A staffing transition with the campus ministry at Shepherd has created an opportunity to revisit our vision for that ministry in the hopes of going even bigger and bolder in the years to come.

All of which is to say to our newest members that you are joining a church today that is much like those earliest disciples of Jesus, in the wake of his ascension, ready to get on with the ministry, but very much in the earliest stages of the next right thing, with few blueprints to guide us, but with a whole lot of Spirit to invigorate us.

And God is blessing us, even as we are blessing God and celebrating your, with great joy, *together*, and never alone.