

Adapting

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In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' ⁷He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

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A colleague of mine is currently on a once-in-a-lifetime trip through Europe. He's been sharing amazing photos along the way, from natural wonders to ancient libraries. A couple of days ago he posted pictures of chairs. Simple wooden chairs. Simple wooden chairs in the sanctuaries of two venerable cathedrals in Ireland. Look, he said! These chairs are so much more flexible than the pews in our churches in New England. If these ancient cathedrals can switch from pews to practical and adaptable chairs, surely US churches could do the same.

One of our mutual friends gently pointed out that these cathedrals never had pews. When they were built, the congregation was simply expected to stand. They didn't have heat, either. And, by the way, Pilgrim's pews are just fine. I do, however, recall the story of one of the people who objected to adapting our pews to accommodate wheelchairs - and later, that person's own family needed wheelchair access.

Nonetheless, what my colleague was pointing to was adaptation. In 2024, we need to adapt. In fact, in each era of our common Christian life, adaptation has been needed.

Let's think about the earliest Christians, as described in Acts. Adaptation was one of the great themes of their life together.

Think about these first verses, and what they tell us. Some of these folks had walked around Galilee and Jerusalem with Jesus for two or three years, devoting their lives to him. Then, he died and rose...and they had about a minute (the text says forty days) to celebrate his resurrection before he was suddenly getting ready to leave for the last time. What shall we do, his followers asked him? When will things happen? The promise is coming, the Holy Spirit is coming, he told them. But you won't always know when. Adapt. And then he ascended. You can almost hear the gears turning in their minds as they stood there watching the clouds.

And the angels walked up to these followers and asked, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?

In other words...it was time to adapt to their new reality. It was time to figure out how to be Jesus followers without Jesus right there to follow.

It was time to figure out where to go next - but the good news was that the risen Christ had left them a roadmap.

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

This was not how things had gone before. Jesus & his followers moved through Galilee, and then into Jerusalem in Judea. In Acts, the Jesus movement spread to new places and regions. All Judea, and to the ends of the earth.

They stayed in Jerusalem for a while and did good work for Love's sake. They moved out through Judea and Samaria and preached and healed and built the church. They moved out into the empire, following the teachings of Jesus and spreading the word. In Antioch, a Roman city, they were first called Christians. The early church grew, spread, diversified, and developed a new identity. The early church adapted to living in the name of Jesus but without Jesus present. They served new people in new ways, but always following the Way of Jesus.

This has been the work of the church for the past two thousand years: in each era, to adapt to living in the name of Jesus and the way of Jesus, for the sake of love, for the sake of neighbors in every place and every time. Our faith has never been static.

Let's think about this at Pilgrim in 2024. How is it that we are witnesses, "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth?" Or, in Lexington, in Massachusetts, in the US, around the world?

How do we adapt to the world and circumstances in which we live now?

How is it that we - in the words of our conference's motto - 'live the love and justice of Jesus' in 2024?

We can look back to what we have done in decades past - and it is always important to celebrate the ways we've served. But, we're not going back - we're going forward.

The text this morning tells us that Jesus' early followers wanted a return to an old kind of kingdom, but Jesus told them to go forward into the reign of God.

But, like the early pioneers of the Way, we'll also be prepared and equipped. Prepared through prayer and community. Prepared through the Holy Spirit that came on them that Pentecost day - we are equipped as they were. "Jesus prepared his followers to continue in the pattern of ministry that he had begun."¹

I'm reminded of the words of Episcopal leader Michael Curry:

"The Jesus movement does not exist to serve the institution of the church, The Church exists to serve the movement of Jesus!" This is the same Michael Curry known for the motto Love is the Way (of Jesus).

Last week on Easter, we heard Mark's unfinished story of the resurrection, and we talked about Jesus followers writing the next chapter of the story. In Eastertide 2024, how is Pilgrim writing our next chapter of the Way of our Savior? How are we

¹ New Interpreters Bible Acts volume, p. 44

witnessing to the love and justice of Jesus in Lexington, in Massachusetts, in the US, in the world?

I know a few things we're doing - we are praising God with amazing music, we are offering news of God's extravagant love through being Open and Affirming, we are caring for our members and neighbors in lovely moments like men's coffee and crafternoon, we are teaching our children, we are feeding our neighbors and meeting tangible needs - and we are joining in the work of the UCC nationally and globally.

But I wonder what the next phase of our adaptation will be here at Pilgrim? How will we look at the needs of our neighbors in this this moment and adapt to care for them? How will we be witnesses?

There is one thing for sure: God is still speaking, and we are still adapting - so that we can keep being witnesses of the good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.

In the name of our loving, liberating, and life giving God! - Michael Curry