

Sermon | Seventh Sunday of Easter | May 21, 2023
Acts 1:6-14 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusunur

We are in the final week of Easter season. Next Sunday, we celebrate Pentecost. From Easter to Pentecost, those fifty days are a special celebration of resurrection and life in the church's liturgy. But for the first Christians those seven weeks or so were the most intense period of churning. It was a roller coaster of emotions. Those fifty days for the first Christians seem to me like a period of endless transitions. By the time they could make sense of one event another completely unexpected event followed. It was like they were passing from one thing to another, always finding themselves in a place of uncertainty.

Many of you may have experienced periods which might have felt like constant transitions. My family and I experienced a period of what seemed like endless transitions for a few months starting last summer. Within a span of four days we moved to a new apartment, I was ordained in the church, and we travelled to our families in India after five years of not being able to visit them. While there, my father was diagnosed with cancer, my wife's mother suffered a stroke and was partially paralyzed, and we spent all our time trying to provide care. As soon as we returned home, my wife started a new job, and my daughter started high school. In time we moved again to a different apartment to be closer to her school. We were away from friends and a community we had lived in for ten years. The transitions and the emotional upheavals of those months felt relentless.

For the first Christians, the constant transitions during those fifty days required them to grapple with the core of their faith and identity. First it was the passage from Good Friday to Easter Day. The transition of coping with those three days may have seemed like eternity. They had been earnestly following Jesus for about three

years. With the death of Jesus all their hopes of the restoration of Israel were dashed to pieces. They feared that since their leader was dead, they would now be hunted down too. They hid in fear, mourning and grieving for Jesus, trying to make peace with the fact that their dream had ended. But within a couple of days following his death, they hear news of Jesus coming back to life again. They were confused but joyful, skeptical but amazed.

But the transitions had not ended. Easter Day to Ascension turned out to be another period of intense transition. Today's scripture reading from the book Acts recounts this transition. The resurrected Jesus began appearing to them and speaking to them and comforting them for forty days. They might have thought this was the new normal. Maybe this was how the kingdom of Israel would be restored. On one occasion they ask this resurrected Jesus: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

But if they were getting used to that idea, then lo and behold, on the fortieth day Jesus was taken away from them up into heaven and "and a cloud took him out of their sight." They could see him no longer. Last Thursday, marked that fortieth day, celebrated as the Ascension Day in the church's calendar. The artwork on the cover of your bulletins depicts the expressions that the disciples might have had when their lord was once again taken away from them. The memory of him being taken away from them when he was arrested and crucified might have come back to them.

The Book of Acts gives the picture that they were stunned into silence as they kept intently looking up into the sky. Did their last hope—the resurrected Jesus—just fly away? They then see angles giving them a promise that Jesus would come back. But did they have

the strength to take this promise seriously? Should they be joyful for the promise? Did they have it in them to hope again, even though their hopes never materialized the way they thought?

It seems to me, that a transition period, a passage, a liminal space, was a reality that was going to be with the disciples constantly.

Did Pentecost Day which came ten days later, finally bring an end to that feeling of confusion and uncertainty to the followers of Jesus? The long history of the church from the time of the first century to the present day, gives a resounding 'no' as the answer. We are perpetually in this transition place. Time and again we deal with challenges within the church and challenges outside in the world which do not provide us with easy resolutions. We confront the painful divisions of Christ's body- the church. We confront the sins that the church has participated in. We confront the magnitude of suffering in a world besieged with wars, sickness, and poverty.

We are perpetually in a liminal place filled with challenges and lacking simple answers. To be a Christian, or follower of Jesus, is not buying a one-way ticket to be instantly transported from earthly suffering to heavenly glory. Rather, it seems to me that to be a follower of Jesus is to strive to live the way of Jesus in this constantly transitional period. This journey and passage will not give us easy answers, time and again we would have to acknowledge our finitude, like the first disciples we may need to keep correcting our understanding of what it means for God's kingdom to be restored, we keep depending on God, and we constantly strive to act in love despite all our limitations.

This week I have been grappling with what is the hope that is in store for the migrants arriving in Chicago and sleeping in police stations, warehouses, schools, and

shelters. I am so grateful to the many of you who wrote to the church and mobilized efforts to do something about this situation. Like some of you, Padma and I visited the 12th district police station last Monday and did what we could for the 60 people who were there that night. But when I left from there, I was utterly confused and uncertain of the future for our new neighbors. I asked myself how would they go about building life from scratch? What's next for them? What's the way forward? What should we do to enable a future for them?

This morning, I am also preaching to myself. I am trying to remind myself that these feelings have always been part of the Christian work to which we have been called. The uncertainty and fear accompanying this liminal time and space is the very sacred ground on which we exercise faith. Uncertainty and fear is the sacred place where we exercise love. We keep striving. We keep loving. We keep thinking critically of solutions. And we do all this while holding on to faith and God's promises. We do all this within the realm of our human limitations but with God's infinite possibilities.

The disciples had asked the resurrected Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" Jesus gives a blunt reply: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." The grand scheme may be ultimately inaccessible to us. But Jesus told his disciples: you will receive power in the Holy Spirit, and you will be my witnesses. As a church, we therefore strive to be witnesses of God and his love in times of uncertainty. We depend on the power of God through the Holy Spirit, to be that witness of love. We hold on to the promise of God in times of transition.

May God be with us in this liminal space of transition.
Amen.