



SERMONS THAT WORK

Ascension Day (C)

Rising Up

[RCL] Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 or Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Human beings have been trained to measure life based on outcomes. In the secular world, your professional acumen is tied to deliverables and visible and outward results of the tasks set before you. Judgments are assigned when others fall short of goals, desired or imposed. People make value judgments based on their understanding of what is needed in a reasonable amount of time.

The disciples of Jesus were equally tied to the completion of tasks. They never completely understood the mission of Jesus and that ministry requires more than a to-do list where assignments are simply crossed off as they are finished. Jesus healed a blind man. Check! Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead. Check! The bleeding woman was healed by touching the cloak of Jesus. Check!

For 40 days, there has been a celebration of the resurrection of the Lord and Savior of the world. Jesus is risen and has made himself visible to the grieving and forlorn disciples who believed that the crucified Jesus had been taken from his tomb. Until he appeared before them, they could not conceive that Jesus was truly the Messiah who could overcome death and a grave. Instead, they believed, like the screaming people at the cross, that he could not save himself. How were they to evaluate his performance during his time with them? He had left them, and they were holed up in a little room in Galilee. Their conclusion was that their rabbi may have been a man with special powers who at any point could be taken away.

As Jesus was preparing the disciples before his death, he taught them how to go out into the world and preach the gospel. He urged them to have the faith necessary to heal those in need in his name. Jesus encouraged them to walk in the world without fear because they knew that a day would come when they would live eternally. As we see in the text from the Acts of the Apostles, just before Jesus is to ascend into heaven, he tells them to wait in Jerusalem for “the promise of the Father.” He vows that the gift of the Holy Spirit will be with them shortly.

Once again, as they are trying to check off the to-do list, their question is, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus reminds them that God will deliver God’s promises at the right time. Their obligation is to witness to the promise of Jesus throughout the world.

You are charged with a similar ministry. In a world that needs the healing touch of Jesus, you are tasked with showing God's love and speaking in God's name about the transformative power of love, compassion, and mercy. Instead of treating your charge like a task, think of it as a lifelong commitment to share the love of Christ with as many humans as possible. God continues to show up in the world full of love, and yet, we know that there are many who don't recognize the God who is walking beside them through all the phases of their lives. As faith followers, you have every opportunity to live in peace because you know that you are never alone. When the chips are down and solutions seem hard to come by, that "peace that surpasses all understanding" guides you to clarity and provides the space to find the answers you are seeking. At a time when those around you are concerned about so many issues impacting the world, this is your moment. God did not promise that deliverance would come at the snap of a finger; rather, God promised that he would rescue God's people in due season. We never know the day nor the hour, so we keep praying, we keep loving, we keep helping, and we keep nudging others to have faith in a God who has never failed to answer the prayers of the people.

Jesus visited the disciples a number of times following the resurrection. He allowed them to see his wounds and to touch them in order to deepen their faith. He fed them and ate with them. They prayed together and Jesus once again gave them their marching orders. By now, beloved, they knew three things for sure:

1. Christ has died: They sat in deep mourning following the crucifixion. The reality began to set in. They reflected on their responses following the events after the Last Supper. Judas had betrayed him. Some had run once Jesus was captured by the Roman soldiers. Peter denied knowing him.
2. Christ is risen: The women went to the tomb early on the third day to add the spices that they had prepared. Jesus was not there, and they panicked. Two men standing near the tomb said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen." They ran back to tell the others. The men didn't believe them. Peter and the others got up and went to see for themselves. Filled with fear, they decided to escape Jerusalem. Jesus directed them to Galilee.
3. Christ will come again: Jesus gave them all that they needed while they waited for his return. He did not tell his students to sit and wait forever until he came back. He simply told them to wait until they were "clothed with power from on high." That clothing was the Holy Spirit. He had taught them to go out two by two and to speak the truth in his name. He also instructed them not to worry when they encountered those who did not believe: "Shake off the dust from your feet" and move on. There are many people who need to hear what you modern disciples have to say.

As Christians, you are clothed with that same power from the time of baptism. You are gifted with everything like the disciples. You get to choose what to do with the powers you have been given. We are in this great time of celebration and the exuberance is palpable. The joy can be contagious. This annual period of time is a reminder that Jesus never stops caring for his people.

The season of Easter allows the faithful to hold dear that eternal life is promised to those who follow the life of Jesus. You hear that promise consistently in your daily walk with God. Your relationship is strengthened through prayer and action. Your connection to God is enhanced when you dine at the table of Christ and share in the communion. As God has been revealed to you, so you are called to reveal God to others by the way in which you show up in the world.

As Christ ascends, so you are given an opportunity to rise up. You, beloved, must rise up against the contemporary tax collectors and money changers. You must rise up and help the hungry and the thirsty. You must rise up and love the abused, the unsheltered, and those who have never known love. You must rise up against injustice and the silencing of those who have a message to deliver or a song in their heart. You must rise up and inform people that “if it is not about love, it’s not about God.” Rise up in this beautiful season of Easter. Rise up and sing your song. Rise up with your heart wide open and share your love. God is with you. God will always be with you. What could be more joyful than that? Amen.

The Rev. Kathleen Walker joined the bishop’s staff in the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina in February 2020 to focus on the contributions and vitality of historically Black congregations by helping form a more cohesive bond of inclusion with other parishes and the diocese. The goal is to ensure that all predominantly Black congregations have the best opportunity to make the best use of the resources of their parishes, partnerships, and the diocese. Rev. Kathy earned a bachelor’s degree and a Master of Public Administration degree from Barry University in Miami Shores, Fla. After serving in the City of Miami for approximately a dozen years as administrative assistant to the deputy chief of police and later as a senior human resources generalist, she moved to Virginia and graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018. She has dedicated many years to the cause of social justice. Rev. Kathy is committed to fulfilling the diocese’s priority of becoming Beloved Community.