



Ascension Day (B)

After This

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

“Who are we going to be after this?”

Let us imagine the disciples, gazing up into heaven, witnessing yet another miracle, and wondering that exact thing — the same thing that we now wonder about the end of the pandemic. They, like we, had lived through something awful and wonderful and traumatic and miraculous and unprecedented. And now, who would they be? Who will *we* be, after this?

It’s a question that anyone who has ever lived through a significant event has wondered. You can even hear the question echoing through the very pages of the Bible, after every story from the Garden of Eden to the exodus, to the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in the Old Testament, to the foot of the cross and all the way through the Ascension and Pentecost.

Who are we going to be after this?

Who has this event made us? How has it shaped us?

How is this extraordinary thing that is happening changing us and shaping us in ways that we can only begin to imagine right now? Our parents and grandparents wondered it while wars raged, and plagues took their toll, and other great events occurred.

After all of this ends — who will we be?

As we begin to see the possibility of normalcy on the horizon, this is a thing that we wonder, and that would serve us well to consider.

Everyone in crisis turns into a moody teenager, in a way. We think, “No one has ever gone through anything this bad. No one would understand!” But it’s never true.

Our history books and the Bible tie up all of these monumental stories with these nice endings, and that can be deceptive to us. How easily we forget that the people who were *in* those stories didn't know those endings until they happened. We are living through history, and we, just like everyone who has ever lived through a significant event, have felt lost and afraid and angry and *really*, this whole time, have just wanted a return to normalcy. Everyone who has ever lived through a war has dreamed of a time when they could go out in safety and calm again. We are not living through a war, but there are some parallels.

We, too, dream of normalcy. With vaccines being widely distributed, we can finally almost taste it.

Someday, children who have yet to be born will read their history books and see how all of this ended, but they will not know what we have lived through. Not really. Not as intimately. In the same way that we do not truly know the events that we did not live through. We do not know the fear and anxieties of war until we have lived through one. We don't know the hardship of national crisis until we live through it. In the same way, children yet to be born will not understand the coronavirus pandemic when they read about it in their history books.

Yes, they will see the photographs of the angry protestors and the people in masks at the grocery store and on the street. They will see the photos of outdoor church services. They will read politicians' speeches and learn about famous scientists who developed safety protocols and vaccines. They will learn of the mistakes and triumphs of this time. The ones who are especially emotionally intelligent and empathetic will be able to imagine the fear and the anger and the frustration that we feel right now, but they will not *know* it. We should pray they never do.

Who are we going to be after this?

We, too, don't know what it must have been like to live through Christianity's first days. In this story, with Jesus floating off into the sky, the disciples must have wondered, "Who are we going to be after this?"

After all they've seen, they can now no longer go back to their lives before they met the carpenter turned rabbi from Galilee. They wanted answers, too. Before Jesus ascended, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

In much the same way, for the past many months, we have asked anyone who might know when some signs of normalcy might be restored to us.

We are lucky enough to have the story of Jesus and the disciples nicely bound in the pages of our Bibles and in our history books. We know how everything turned out: the Church got started, the Gospel spread, and Christians ended up doing some really great things and some really awful things in Jesus' name for 2,000 years. And now, in 2020 and 2021, we were also not the first to be kept away from our church sanctuaries by the threat of communicable disease.

The disciples, for their part, knew none of that history. All they knew is that they were now part of something extraordinary, and something hard, that had yet to work itself out. They didn't yet fully understand their part in it or its impact on them. They just knew that their lives were changed forever.

Who are we going to be after this?

The answer was up to them. And the answer, now, is up to us.

As we imagine Christ floating far up into the sky on this Ascension Day, we wait with the disciples for the coming of Pentecost. One last note on the Gospel:

While Jesus was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward 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."

This moment is a bit funny. We imagine the disciples gazing up, mouths open, and some angels coming by and saying those words.

"This Jesus, who has been taken up into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Don't stand there and wait for something to happen. Trust us, the angels say, *you'll know it* when it happens. For now, you'll just have to trust that it will happen and that his promise is true: Christ is with you until then. That will have to be enough.

We'll know when the pandemic is fully over. There's no need to stand staring at the sky, or at the news. For now, you'll just have to trust that it will happen, and is already happening — this will end, and is ending — and the promise is still true. No plague in history has lasted forever.

We are one in Christ Jesus. We are bound together in love. And Christ is with us still, and that *is* enough. You are enough.

No, we don't know how this all ends. But we are not the first to feel uncertain. So, "who are we going to be after this?"

We are, were, and will be God's own beloved people, fully human, and fully loved. That's all we've got, and luckily, pandemic or not, that's all we'll ever need. Amen.

Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor serving Our Savior's Lutheran Church in South Hadley, Massachusetts. A product of several places, she was born and raised in rural south Alabama, lived most of her adult life to date in Atlanta, and has called New England home for the past four years. Anna graduated from the Candler School of Theology in 2011, and since then she has served in both parish ministry and hospital chaplaincy. In her spare time, Anna enjoys keeping up with politics and pop culture (especially music), hiking, running, and CrossFit.

