

" You Will Be My Witnesses. "

More or less, 40 days ago, Jesus was resurrected at Easter. For this perfect amount of time, the enough amount of time, the sufficient enough of time, Jesus has appeared in the breaking of bread. Jesus has appeared alongside us. Jesus has appeared behind locked doors; and appeared to those questioning and those in grief. More and more have seen him, encountered him, and known he lives among us. Now Jesus asks his family and friends to gather.

With excitement, they gather. They ask Jesus, "NOW is it finally time that you are going to restore Israel? Is NOW the time we kick out Rome, enter a golden age, peace reigns over Earth, and all is perfect? Are you going to take the title of King now?"

Jesus replies. "That isn't for you to know. But! You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit. You will be my witnesses locally, afar, and to every end of the earth."

And then, right before our eyes. He is lifted up into heaven. I can't image their tears are dried before two angelic beings say, "Why are you gaping up at the sky? This Jesus, who you just saw be taken up to heaven, will return to you in the same way."

And so they return to the city. All of them. And all of them gather together. All of them pray together. Live together. Be together. Would the Holy Spirit come? (We're not told today. That's next week's story!)

Today, we're asked to slow way down and consider this scene. Jesus is back. Death didn't win. And now he is gathering us all together. Why won't it be the Messianic Age? Why won't we be the first of his workers to restore the world? We're going to Make God's World Great Again!

But Jesus tells us... no. The timeline for the golden age is not ours to know. There isn't a plan for humans that says "Six months from now..." Instead, he promises a spirit. A holy spirit.

What kind of an answer is that? While they, and us, are pondering what a holy spirit means, what witnessing means, and why we can't know the timeline of God's plans... Jesus leaves.

Do you feel a little betrayed? Or like there is new grief? I picture Jesus' friends and family falling to their knees. He's been taken from them -- again. Their hopes dashed -- again. It's like... like when your loved one has beaten cancer and two months later... there is a new lump. It's like - finally getting pregnant after so long with trying... and then losing the pregnancy. It's like... global crisis after global crisis. Can't we catch a break?

That's why I think the angels come. I think Jesus asks them to nudge his friends and family back on the Way.

The angels say, "Didn't you see how he left unexpectedly? He will return unexpectedly. Didn't you see how he was lifted to heaven? He will descend from heaven. Didn't you notice how he left you with promises of an abiding Spirit, holiness, and commissioned you to love as he loved? He will return to you with an abiding Spirit, holiness, and love upon love."

In other words, remember the Way of Jesus.

When someone we love dies, or hope is crushed, we often need others to recall God's promises to us, and the Way of Jesus. We need someone to join us in the grief and give us the space and listening ear. We need someone to remind us Jesus promised

- We will not be orphaned
- If he leaves us, he will return to us
- We know the Way to where he goes
- He is with us always
- He prepares a place for us
- Those who die do not truly perish, but are held by him

Many of these promises are repeated at our funerals and celebrations of life. We need to remember we are not orphans. Our parents die, but they are still with us. We need to remember our loved ones leave – buried or cremated – but they also return to us. We know them in the habits they did, encounter them in strangers and in sightings of life – and we know the Way they took. When it is our own time to go this Way, I believe they come to us and help us across the veil between living and life-to-come and guide us to where a place is prepared for us.

I believe this cloud of saints, this cloud of witnesses, surrounds us, prays with us, and we join them after our physical deaths: that reunion in the Big Big House of God.

We read today that Jesus' friends and family gather and support each other. Pray together. Live together. I imagine they tell each other their favourite stories of Jesus. They complain about habits he had that annoyed them, "Remember how he always answered questions with a parable? Would a straight answer have killed him!?" I imagine they weep and they laugh together.

That is what funerals are for us today. That's what celebrations of life are. Memorial dinners. Gatherings - I don't care what you call them or their format - so long as the time is given for people to gather, grieve, and when the time is sufficient, full, complete - move towards laughter, acceptance, peace.

The Holy Spirit comes among Jesus' friends and family as they process life without Jesus' physical presence. I know the Spirit is felt among those cry-laughing at funerals (by whatever name.) It is a Holy Spirit of peace that doesn't make sense for the situation, but which happens as we love and lean on one another.

To me, this is witnessing. We witness the love of Christ by loving on one another. We witness of the love of God by collectively grieving and praying, collectively laughing and living. We live a life of witness. We die as witnesses to this love. And, that witness to love continues after our physical bodies are no longer here.

The friends and family of Jesus asked him: When is the time of the Full Reign of God? Jesus doesn't say. I think it is because that timeline is in our own hands. I don't think it is restoring Israel. It isn't returning to the Garden of Eden. It is when we live as Jesus asks of us - loving, forgiving, ending injustice and being devoted to kindness for all the cosmos. And this time builds up among us as a spirit. A spirit fueled by the Holy Spirit.

And suddenly, unexpectedly, the full reign of God appears around us.

I think Jesus had to physically leave us again for us to realize the job is our own. We are asked to love. Not accept a divine wave of the hand and all is well. We're asked to embody God's love. Learn to love one another. Practice that love for all nature, all our relations, all that is.

Jesus is our saviour doesn't mean Jesus is coming to save us from ourselves.

It means Jesus, and his Way of being, give us the power and Spirit to save ourselves through living and dying and rising as he taught.

Jesus is our saviour isn't God's magic wand killing all the evil and saving all the good. It is Jesus' example to us on how to love the evil and the good, and call to people to their better selves.

Jesus is our saviour is Jesus gifting us the power to be OUR best selves.

And to do this, he had to go away.

If you're a Stranger Things fan, the authors were asked why El had to go away at the end. Why couldn't the world have a super-powered woman? The authors replied that as long as El was in the picture, the characters would never live into the kindness she taught. They would just keep turning to her to solve their problems and be their moral guide. They wouldn't leave the nest and fly.

Ah... we just had that image of God. The bird who ruffles her nest and causes her chicks to fly.

Ah... here is Jesus, ruffling the nest, and causing us to fly.

He knew we're going to lose people we love. He knew we're going to face heartaches and pain and loss of hope. He knew we'd be knocked to our knees by the cruelty of life. We need to know we can make it through these things.

And so, our mother bird shows us how: be together. Lean on one another. Pray together. Grieve together. And rise together. Witness to one another that we are not alone; this is God's world; God is love; and together, we'll get through this.

And one day, when the time is perfect and sufficient and enough, we will build a better world out of the grief we've known – and do this through the power of the Holy Spirit that carried us through.

The sorrow is not good. But out of it, with God, we can make good.

God weeps with us, and also encourages us to trust there is yet more goodness awaiting.

God grieves with us, and also assures us God is busy with us preparing better days.

God is with us – and if you can't quite see or feel that truth – just reach out a hand. Be a part of a loving community. And you'll know truly that wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, he is powerfully present among us.

Amen! Amen!

Ephesians 1:15-23 NRSV Ue

Paul's Prayer

¹⁵ I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love^[a] toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰ God^[b] put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,^[c] ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Acts 1: 6-14

The Ascension of Jesus

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But 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.” ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ 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.”

Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ When 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^[a] James. ¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

May God's spirit shape our understanding of these words.

And may they awaken in our hearts

