

*Texts: Acts 1:1-14*

*Subject: The Ascension*

*Theme: Working Through the Worry*

Second Sunday of Easter; Apr. 19, 2020, *Online Worship; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Risen Lord Jesus, Amen.

This first week of the Easter season, also known as Pastor's Vacation, has been one for the history books. First, we didn't take a vacation. Our kids are adapting pretty easily, though I think the volume of their voices has increased quite a bit. This week, our first daughter turned 13, and friends, neighbors, and church members joined a parade of vehicles in front of our house, honking horns and wishing her a happy birthday. Three of our kids worked on their online classes to earn their next belt in TaeKwon Do, and will film videos for their testing this week. Three year-old Jacob has enjoying playing with water guns in the back yard, but misses Noah and all his buddies.

The kids and I watched artists from around the world perform just for us from their living rooms, on the Disney Family Sing-Along, and last night I caught just a bit of the One World Together at Home concert. We are starting to hear good news form New York City, where fewer people have been hospitalized and fewer are dying as a result of the COVID-19 virus, and yet more are suffering. African Americans and Native Americans are being affected by the virus at higher than average rates, nursing home residents are dying in large numbers, and essential workers are reaching their limits physically and emotionally. People are getting more anxious about opening up businesses and public spaces.

Residents of some states in the Midwest are pushing back against shelter in place orders, encouraged by politicians. And yesterday, just a few blocks from here,

local residents took part in another kind of parade - a protest against the continued closure of schools and businesses here in Las Vegas. High School Seniors will likely miss graduation and many of the cherished rites of passage we all remember. Emotions are running high. People are worried. We wonder what will happen next.

What do we do with all that worry? all that fear? all that anxiety? How do we cope? Last week, we heard the resurrection account in the Gospel of Mark, and this week, we're moving into the book of Acts, a continuation of Luke's orderly account of the good news. It's the telling the story of the disciples and the community that became the church after Jesus ascended to be with the Father. From the fear and amazement at the empty tomb, the women and Peter, along with the disciples, had to move forward in faith, had to figure out how they would continue to be followers of Jesus in a hostile environment, despite their discouragement and disarray.

They had seen Jesus' suffering death on the cross, and then He appeared to them! He showed up and proved to them it was really Him. Jesus was back and alive! If they doubted, they could now be sure, Jesus had beaten death - He is Risen indeed! They had to wonder then what it was all about. They had to have worried and been afraid of the reaction of the authorities around them. They must have feared for their lives, and were together wondering what might happen next. Luke's Gospel is the only one with a sequel - and unlike most Hollywood sequels, it won't disappoint. This is the story of the Spirit at work! Jesus friends are given a calling, and the Good News of the Savior of the World is going to be sent out to all nations. The power of the Holy Spirit is coming to form the people of God into the church on earth, and they will be there for the unfolding of the kingdom of God. But they were worried.

We get worried too. Especially in these difficult weeks. How many has it been? Six weeks since we've been in this building together to worship. It feels like a long time. It won't last forever. But this story of the Holy Spirit is a story that we are still living.

Craig Koester from Luther Seminary notes that here in the first chapter of Acts, the Apostles are under a 'shelter in place' order. Jesus ordered them to stay in Jerusalem - and not to leave. Don't we know a little about what that feels like? They're waiting, unsure about what it all means. Jesus has promised a new kind of baptism He calls 'the promise of the Father.' They would receive the Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost - and we'll get to that story in 6 more weeks.

They tried to make sense of it all and to understand what Jesus was up to. They thought this could be the time like when David was King, and the people were able to live in peace, without the threat of the Empire. Maybe it would be more like when Solomon was King and worship was centralized in the temple, and God's glory was celebrated. Maybe it would be something else - they were unsure. But Jesus is there and answers their question by saying, "it's not for you to know." That's not what this waiting is about. God's in charge of that, and it's hidden. Some things remain a mystery. But Jesus *does* promise that they would receive power when the Spirit comes, and that they would be witnesses from Jerusalem, in the region, and eventually to the whole world. They had work to do. Then, He went up.

Yes, Jesus *ascended* into heaven. "He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight." So they're staring up at the clouds. Suddenly, there were two people in white robes, questioning why they were staring up into the sky. They give the

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

Imagine that for a minute. Jesus, who was crucified just over a month before, came back, was alive, and now was just lifted into the clouds, and these guys say that he’s coming back the same way. What do you do with that information? I would wonder how long we were supposed to wait. I wouldn’t go very far, if it’s true that he’s coming back down. I like to think anyway, that I’d be camped out right there. I’d be worried that I’d miss him.

After all that, with so many questions unanswered, I have to imagine the disciples were worried. They were afraid. They were faithful too, that’s important to know. So are we. But we worry too. In our time, we wonder how to survive, what to do next, and how to get through the trials we all face, not just a virus, but also grief, pain, illness, strained relationships, and more. How do we calm our worried minds (besides eating and watching Netflix)? How do we heal broken hearts? How do we live while we wait to see Jesus? How do we *work through the worries* we carry during this time?

We wait.

The disciples waited, at the direction of Jesus. They no doubt had stories to tell, places to go, things to do, but they waited in obedience to the Lord. As we continue to hear the news of the spread of the coronavirus this year, we wait and see what will happen next. We might get impatient. We might feel like our rights are being infringed upon, and we have that urge to get out, to push back against the direction to wait. Maybe you’ve enjoyed the way the world around us has slowed down. The pace of life has changed. Some things I’ve noticed: Neighbors come out and greet one another,

happy to see another face. There are fewer airplanes in the sky, that I take notice when they fly over my house. I've seen more birds - and different varieties. Jesus' friends did get outside for a while to hike up the Mount of Olives just outside the city. This week we spent some time outdoors at Whitney Mesa Nature Preserve - the back side of the bluff just south of Russell and Mountain Vista. We saw chipmunks, quail, birds and lizards. The kids climbed rocks, waded through tall grasses, and looked for treasure. It's good for us to wait.

In her book *Grounded: Finding God in the World*, Diana Butler Bass writes about noticing the place where the earth meets the sea and sky in Santa Barbara and taking in the beauty of nature, being reminded that God was there. As we find ourselves taking time to notice the creation around us, and we remember that we are a part of that creation - may we be overwhelmed with that sense of thankfulness, and feel our worries drift for a bit.

We wait. We create.

Maybe you've seen the videos of musicians and performers online. Others are taking time away from rushed work weeks to paint, to build, to cook, to write. Others will find nine months from now they've created a new human being - *not me, of course*. (Maybe historians will call it *Generation COVID-19*, or *the Corona Kids*.) Maybe you've created new space in your home. I've had many people ask if our thrift store Martin's Mart is open - they want to bring those donations out. I've assembled furniture, painted a bathroom, and even cut down a dead tree. Yesterday, Ivy and I got to dig in the dirt. We laid some drip irrigation in a planter outside, and I'm sure I'm not the only one doing home projects, as the hardware store is just as busy as the grocery store. Yes, *I wear a*

*mask when I go there.* Working with our hands, creating art, making things, even doing puzzles can take our mind on a journey from focusing on the real worries we face - and those we make up in our heads - to focus on what's right in front of us. Creating puts us in the moment. It's one way the Spirit works in us and through us. Pat and Linda and Joanne are sewing. My friend Kevin writes stories. My friend Bobby does drawings. My mom is baking. The kids took part in an online craft class. Isaac was excited to tell about a hole he dug. It was impressive. We are part of the creation, and we are creative beings too.

We wait. We create. We pray.

There in that upper room, Mary, Jesus' brothers, and Peter and the other ten were gathered to pray. How did they pray? They must have prayed as Jesus taught them. They prayed for the needs of the people around them. They prayed for safety and health and peace. They prayed the kingdom would come, and that they would be provided with the things they needed. They would have prayed through scripture, the psalms, and the prophets. Maybe then they would sing hymns, and share a meal. Their worship happened in that place where they gathered to remember Jesus and all that He had said and done. Even through their worries and fears, they found a way to pray and worship. They were becoming the church.

So do we. We gather around screens these days, and we worship and pray for health and peace, and patience, and kindness, grace, and mercy. We pray that we will be together in the same place again to hug and shake hands eventually. We don't know when that day will be. But, we trust that Jesus is showing up in the world around us, just as he promised, and that we will see him. The two dressed in white told the apostles

that they would, “see Jesus coming ‘in the same way’ as [they] saw him go into heaven.”

I wonder if that’s less about descending from the sky but that they would see him come *unexpectedly*, just as he went up. Maybe they would see Him *in plain sight*, before their eyes, just as He ascended into the cloud. Or that they would see him come *without pretense* - Elijah had a whirlwind and a flaming chariot when he went up. Maybe they meant they would see Jesus come *when the time was right*, just as it was that day.

Either way, they would see Him again, and we believe that we will too.

We will see Him in the faces of those we serve and care for in these difficult weeks, and of course in those who care for us. We will see Him in the moments we stop to notice His presence in our lives. We will see Him in the words of scripture that give us peace and make us wonder, and transform us. We are not called to worry but to trust. We are the church, the ones who live the kingdom here and now. We are His witnesses. We will see Him, and we will work through our worries to share His story, His glory, and His grace to the ends of the earth. Amen.