

“What now?” (24May2020)
Acts1:6-14; Psalm66:8-20;
1Peter4:12-14,5:6-11; John17:1-11

The Easter season began with Jesus showing up. On Easter Sunday, he met the women on their way back from the tomb and said, “Howdy! Greetings!”

The next week, he showed up behind locked doors, speaking Peace, breathing the Holy Spirit, letting Thomas poke at the holes in him.

Then he wandered along with two random disciples on the road, asking them what troubled them, responding with Scripture, being made known in the breaking of the bread while vanishing.

That already moves away from direct presence. Rather than the touchable Jesus, he was disappearing Jesus. He was known in Bible stories and placed in our hands with bread rather than being himself one we could hear and grab.

Now 43 days into this 50 day Easter season, Jesus is further gone. In fact, in our 1st reading he floated out of sight, like when you let a helium balloon go and watch it become a red speck and track it and track it and then can't spot it anymore. However it happened, the risen Jesus wasn't with them anymore.

We probably feel hundreds of years further removed from Jesus, without access to him. So, now what?

We do celebrate resurrection. The promise persists. The reality remains relevant. We have the good news.

But it is paired with the bad news of no presence. We don't have Jesus with us, for reminders, for reassurances, for the clarity, to poke with our fingers and to probe with our questions.

So as we approach the end of the Easter season, it seems appropriate that we're left asking what we look to if we don't directly get to look to Jesus. We'll eventually encounter seven *now what* possibilities from our readings.

The disciples in Acts start with our own anxiety, our anxiousness, our impatience. “Is now the time?” they ask. Hey Jesus, if you've got power

and you are the answer, to which this world and this universe is headed, is now the time?

It's not an unreasonable question that they ask and we ask. We've had enough of this. We're ready for things to change, for the incompetent not to be in charge, for disease not to be running amok, with injustice that takes the wrong lives, with struggling economy, for death to be done, we're ready for life.

The disciples expect having Jesus would equal a kingdom. They wanted a theocracy, godly empire, instead of the Roman Empire. Maybe it would mean they'd no longer be trampled underfoot, with expendable lives, simply used for the sake of others. Maybe it would mean strength instead of weakness.

Their attitude is, Hey Jesus—aren't you going to do something about all these problems we're facing? But Jesus was more like, I'm outta here. He wasn't going to take an emperor's throne, as the king who ruled like they wanted. Instead Jesus was about to leave.

But for them seeking strength, he said that in his absence they would be clothed with power from on high. They'd get the Holy Spirit. Here's a first place we look without Jesus. *Now what?* You have the Holy Spirit instead.

We had Jesus' assurance last week that the Holy Spirit is in us, always with us. She advocates and comforts and gives us faith. That is huge strength, the best confidence, but it is still indistinct and nondescript. If we're looking to look to *something* when Jesus is gone, finding the Spirit inside of us may not be all that clear for “now what.”

Some find strength in special spirit-y speaking in tongues or holy healings. They believe that's what this power is about. It works for them, and that's okay. But it leaves me with worsened absence. The Spirit giving me quiet inner strength may be good, and enabling my trust in Jesus may be best. But if I'm looking for evidence in my abilities, then I feel I'm lacking even more.

Still, that's tough because the next *now what?* is that Jesus says we'll be his witnesses, to the ends of the earth. Other passages describe that role as being ambassadors. We represent Jesus. So

I am supposed to look for Jesus in me, in what I say and do.

The Tuesday Beer and Bible group pondered our role as witnesses, especially right now. One of the main thoughts was about masks, that we wear masks out of love for our neighbors, as a particularly Christian thing to do, in some way bearing witness to Jesus.

Such concern for the vulnerable fits with the Psalm, which describes God as a parent to orphans and defender for widows, who seeks liberty for prisoners. Those were the most at-risk people in that culture, so maybe we emulate it.

This language will be echoed by our statement of faith, from the Belhar Confession, on a God known for the poor, who is also made known as we give bread to the hungry and justice to the oppressed, in supporting the downtrodden.

Again, I usually feel like a shoddy representative of that. And if I'm left looking for the absent Jesus behind your masks, that's neither very obvious nor really much of a burden. 1st Peter said it would involve discipline and steadfast resistance. It's not even clear what we're resisting today—we might say the harm of the virus?—and, anyway, I don't count myself very disciplined.

For the reverse perspective, 1st Peter also says that we're recognized not for the good we do, but are associated with Jesus because—*now what?*—we suffer. Luther considered this a “mark” of the church.* Though we right now know the church isn't best marked by our building, since we are dispersed community, we probably still think much about church being a worship service, with Bible readings and such. Luther's ultimate mark of the church, though, was to look for suffering. He said we know the cross and endure hardship and are “inwardly sad, timid, terrified.”

Certainly these days involve hardship and sadness, and I trust and proclaim that Jesus is with us in any suffering and fear and is there in the face of death. But we don't seek out persecution or

glory in it, and we're probably not really suffering the pandemic worse than others just because we're Christian.

Yet it's not just suffering, it's what we do with it. For one thing, we encounter it with prayer, just as Jesus did in our Gospel reading, on the night of his betrayal and arrest, as he was moving toward his death. *Now what?* We pray. You “cast all our anxiety on God, who cares for you,” as it offered in 1st Peter. We hold our own worries and the struggles and stresses of our neighbors and the world in prayer, and we trust that God hears and receives us. Our prayer may be a way we draw near to Jesus.

And he also draws near to us in his word. He says that his words came from God and he gave them to us, and he is present with us, even now in these words. *Now what,* when we don't have Jesus? He's in his word.

Still, words are fleeting and transient, even when we take them to heart and it's not in one ear and out the other. We really need the Word that becomes flesh. That was why we looked to Jesus to begin with, and it leaves us looking now.

So his prayer also recognizes his presence in community. *Now what?* We are the Body of Christ. Jesus directly acknowledges that he is no longer in the world, but we are in the world. We're his presence.

I hope you retain some confidence in that, as you gather now in worship, and as you remember the broader relationships of church community. That is difficult in these days. You may rely on these connections and admit that is central. Brian Kuhn isn't wrong when he feels that one of the most important things about church for him is getting to see his friends. We're dependent on each other, and Jesus knows that, knows that in each other as church, we find him.

Maybe the last place to look for and to have a hint of Jesus today, the last *now what* is in the waiting, in our patience. 1st Peter had phrases like

* *On the Councils and the Church* lists seven marks:
First. This Christian, holy people is to be known by this, that it has God's Word. Second. God's people, or the Christian holy people, is known by the holy Sacrament of Baptism, when it is rightly taught and believed and used according to Christ's ordinance. Third. God's people, or a Christian, holy Church is known by the holy Sacrament of the Altar, when it is rightly administered according to Christ's institution and is believed and received. Fourth. The people of God, or holy Christians, are known by the keys, which they publicly

use. Christ decrees, in Matthew 18:15 that if a Christian sins, he shall be rebuked, and if he does not amend his ways, he shall be bound and cast out; but if he amends, he shall be set free. This is the power of the keys. Fifth. The Church is known outwardly by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices which they occupy. Sixth. The holy, Christian people is known by prayer and public thanksgiving and praise to God. Seventh. The holy, Christian Church is outwardly known by the holy possession of the Holy Cross. (Luther's Works, vol41, p149-164)

“for a little while” and “in due time.” And we come back to that opening from the disciples, asking Jesus, “is now the time?” Those disciples only had to wait 10 days for Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit would come. There may be some of it that feels like a longer wait for us, and we may have just as much uncertainty. But we also have confidence.

Lisa Johnsen posted a Jan Richardson poem ** the other day written for Ascension and serving for now. It includes this:

*Wait
and see what comes
to fill
the gaping hole
in your chest.
Wait with your hands open
to receive what could never come
except to what is empty
and hollow.
You cannot know it now,
cannot even imagine
what lies ahead,
but I tell you
the day is coming...
Wait for it.*

** <https://www.facebook.com/JanRichardsonAuthor/posts/2614718488847514>