

7 Easter A May 24, 2020 Space Between
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Jesus said, now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world..." John 17:11

After 5 years as serving as Rector at Church of the Good Shepherd here in Athens, Ohio, there are many things I have observed this parish is good at, and one thing this parish is very good at is living the transition from one academic semester to the next. Perhaps this is because we are located in the heart of an academic university that is constantly undergoing change: people come and go whether its new students, graduating students, faculty or students studying abroad, retirements, transfers. There are so many reasons why we say goodbye and hello sometimes in the very same semester, and we seem to have become accustomed to our parish looking a little different semester to semester.

It is part of our natural rhythm to lovingly bid graduating seniors farewell and by the fall feel the excitement of the newness of another academic year and the changes it will bring. We've become so accustomed to this rhythm that we might take for granted the space in between the leaving and starting that is just as important when it comes to change. It's not just winter or summer break, it's the space between changes, it's the collective breath the university and our town feels between the energy of graduation and the energy of move-in weekend. It's a slowing that we all can sense and is part of the deeply ingrained rhythm of life here in Athens.

I know it has been different this year, of course. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a lot from us, changed customary rituals and filled that space I am talking about with fear, anger, sadness, and anxiety.

But before the virus changed the world, we had this space between graduation and the start of a new semester. It was a time of rest, preparation, and anticipation. It was a time that is very much what this day and this week in the Church Year is all about.

The last Sunday in the Easter Season is a strange day in the Church Year, with Jesus already gone, ascended into heaven, leaving nothing behind to celebrate. It's a day that seems to embrace the space Jesus' ascension created.

The ascension of Jesus appears in the New Testament book Acts of the Apostles, where the risen Jesus, after hanging out with his disciples for a few weeks, was taken up into the clouds of heaven, leaving his disciples to watch him disappear from view. As they watched, it says in the Book of Acts, suddenly, like Jesus' resurrection, two

angels appeared to ask the disciples a question. Angels are pretty good question askers. It seems whenever they aren't telling someone to not be afraid, they are asking a question. They asked Mary Magdalene why she was crying at the empty tomb. And they asked the disciples why they were standing around looking at the sky.

One of the things I love about angels in the Bible is they seem to point people to something new, especially the new thing God is up to in the world. They pointed Mary and Joseph to Jesus' birth, to God coming into the world in a new way. They pointed Mary Magdalene and the women who went to the tomb to the new resurrection life of Jesus that was out and about in the world. And now, the angels are pointing the disciples back into the world that has been changed by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The angels seem to be saying now that Jesus has ascended, there is another change coming, one that will require the disciples to see following Jesus in a new way.

However, the angels didn't give the disciples a new set of rules to follow, or a program to do. They didn't even give the disciples a new leader to follow. Instead they pointed them in a new the direction. And the disciples didn't respond by immediately going into the streets preaching, healing, and proclaiming. Instead, they went back to the upper room where they had been with Jesus during the Last Supper. There they didn't brainstorm or make a plan for how they were going to follow Jesus now that Jesus had ascended. Instead, the author of the Book of Acts tells us, they devoted themselves to prayer.

I admire how that story doesn't ignore the space between Jesus' ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit we will celebrate next Sunday on Pentecost. I love how the scriptures don't rush from event to event like an action adventure movie, and instead lingers in those spaces in between. The space Jesus leaves after his ascension in Acts makes room for the sadness and grief of Jesus' physical departure. It also makes room for rest and trust; instead of trying to figure out everything by themselves, the disciples seemed to rest from all the excitement of being around the risen Jesus and rest in their trust in God by devoting themselves to prayer.

A prayer is what today's Gospel is, where the author of John's Gospel finally comes to the end of Jesus' very long speech to his disciples that culminates in what is called the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus because he prayed on behalf of his disciples. It's a long prayer where Jesus talked of his love for his disciples, his worry about them being in a world that won't always understand or welcome them or their message, and his deep desire that his disciples be united in their love of him, love of God, love of each other, and find in all that love the connection that is God. Jesus hoped their love would be the embodiment of God's Love on earth, and thus the continuation of Jesus' mission that all the world will know God and know God is Love.

That's big, awesome, complicated, joyful, difficult, wonderful, godly work. And part of that work is learning how to be in those spaces in between, which can sometimes feel strange because of the combination of loss and newness they represent.

We started the Season of Easter with sadness because we could not be together to celebrate the most important Feast in the Christian faith. It was hard to ignore the absence of flowered crosses, trumpet fanfares, Holy Eucharist, heartily sung hymns of praise, and the energy only a full church on Easter morning can bring. We have moved through the entire Season of Easter with a sense of sadness because we cannot be together and are painfully aware of the emptiness of so much space in between us. It's a sadness that seems to extend as we wonder when we will ever be together again to worship or for other gatherings or what will be missing when we do. It's a sadness we feel even as we learn more about the how the world is different, how it has changed, and we will have to adapt to the changes a virus has brought to our lives. It isn't going to be easy, adapting to those changes.

Maybe that is why this week in the Church Year could be seen as a gift: as the scriptures helping us recognize the in between space we are currently living in and the holiness of this space. Instead of rushing into new programs or rules, perhaps we could instead think about the angel's question as a way to pay attention to what we are doing. Are we willing to use this space to both grieve what we have lost and are losing and at the same time rest in our trust in God? We've done it before, every time a semester ends. Only now, it is admittedly, much bigger.

One way Church of the Good Shepherd is attempting to name the holiness and strangeness and sadness of this current in between space is we created an outdoor votive prayer hill. One of our most successful ministries has been opening our small chapel to the public every day, offering a place where anybody can come into the church to rest or pray or meditate or just be. We have a beautiful votive stand in the chapel with small candles, and invite people to light a candle, because lighting candles is a hopeful prayerful practice for many religions, not just Christianity. And people have come in, prayed, rested, lit candles, and thanked us for sharing our space with them. However, one of the things I grieve is because of the pandemic, our church building is closed which means our chapel is closed. Yet this is also a time when such sacred space is needed.

So, we have come up with a way to try and create that sacred space outside in the church yard. We already have benches and chairs where people can sit and rest and pray. But lighting candles outdoors won't work. So, we made what I am calling prayer stakes: tent stakes with gold ribbons tied to them. The gold ribbon represents light from a candle, and we hope they will reflect the sunlight and perhaps move in the

breeze. We are inviting everyone and anyone to stop by and let the prayer stake represent their prayer by moving it from the side of the front stairs to the hill in front of the church. That means you too. Perhaps you have a prayer you would like to add to our prayer hill. A prayer about what you are grieving or missing. A prayer of concern for those who have lost employment. A prayer for those who are ill. A prayer for those who have lost someone, or for someone who has died. A prayer for those you care about. I hope you have a prayer. And I hope you come by and put a prayer stake in the ground.

If you can't get to the church, you can email me, or the senior warden and we'll make sure your prayer gets on the hill.

Will this change the world? Who knows? The world is going through a lot. But our prayers could show our neighborhood that there are some things that have NOT changed; our love of God, our love of one another and our love of our neighborhood, our community. As strange as this space might feel, it can still reveal God's love in the world, and that is a love we can rest and trust in.