

May 22, 2022 The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Acts 1:1-11

"Seven Minutes"

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"Seven Minutes. Seven minutes. Seven minutes." Many, many years ago when my wife Marta and I used to lead youth mission trips to Maine it was a fourteen hour drive to get there. As the trip progressed the dreaded question would come forth from the seats in the back. "How much longer until we get there???" Instead of offering accurate updates like "nine hours to go," or "eight hours and forty-five minutes to go," or "eight hours and forty minutes to go," to the same question being asked incessantly every few minutes we used to always say, "seven minutes" whenever the question was asked. Our hope was that our response would be just as annoying as the relentless questioning. But we also wanted to remind them the kids that at some point it would be only seven more minutes; that we would reach our goal; that the hope of completing the journey was still true.

Every year we would rent several fifteen passenger vans, pack them up before dawn with teenagers and drive all day. The arc of the trip was always the same. The day would begin with a moment of exhilaration, expectation, and excitement. Then the monotony of the road would set in and one by one the kids would drift into slumber. As they awoke after several hours the barrage of arrival questions would begin and we would plod our way through the seemingly eternal journey. Every year we stayed at the same church and there was this very distinctive bend in the road around a pond that signaled our destination was about

to come into sight. When we spotted that pond you could feel the energy in the van shift from desolation to joy. We were most definitely about to arrive at our destination!

This text from the book of Acts is all about the long and seemingly never-ending journey on which the church finds itself. This Thursday we recognize as Ascension of the Lord. The day we remember Jesus Christ's departure from the earth and journey of return to the rest of the Godhead in heaven. It marks the end of the forty days of post resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples.

On the one hand the disciples are faced with the daunting prospect of no longer having Jesus bodily present with them. On the other hand their entire reality has been reshaped by Christ's victory over death. Do they anguish over Jesus leaving them or celebrate the gift of Easter resurrection?

Before they know Jesus will be leaving them they ask this question filled with hope, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" An entirely appropriate question to ask. If death itself has been defeated, surely now is the time to fix everything that is not right in the world. But they do not get the answer they want. Instead of a resounding "yes" and a tremendous transformation of all that surrounds them, Jesus says this, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority...but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses..."

The disciples' hopes that Jesus' resurrection victory would immediately translate into a transformation of all of the visible world were not to be. What they receive is a nuanced answer that they will need to wait. And they get no indication

of how long they will need to wait. One of the singularly disappointing human experiences is when we believe something remarkably good is about to happen and then we are told it will be delayed and we have no idea how long that delay will be. But there is consolation in Jesus' answer as well. They are promised a gift and given a mission. They will receive the Spirit and they are being called to be witnesses to the resurrection.

Before they can respond with any follow up questions Jesus is lifted up beyond their sight. As the disciples stare longingly up into the now empty sky they are visited by two men in white who ask them "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" What I hear them saying is "You have been given your marching orders. Set your sights not on the sky above but on the world around you and start witnessing to the resurrection.

What a very strange moment in time this was for the disciples. All of existential existence has been transformed by Jesus' Easter victory. And yet, the world keeps spinning on its axis, the sun comes up every morning, and like the rising of the sun, all of the problems of the world continue as well. These disciples, as are we, are caught in the time after the victory of resurrection and before that victory visibly transforms all that surround us.

This is the predicament of the church. We are like those teenagers in the van on their way to Maine. The celebratory start of our journey as the church, Jesus' victory over death has occurred. But the conclusion of our journey, the transformation of all of creation, a world and an existence without pain and shortcoming, sin and suffering, has yet to be

revealed. And we have no idea of when it will be. How long, Lord, how long?

Like those teenagers there are two likely ways we may respond to the long journey we are on. The first is to basically nap our way through it. Allow ourselves to have no hope for the transformation of the world so we become groggy to the possibilities of how the divine can be at work in our midst, in the here and now. The second way we may respond is by allowing our anxiety over the unknown to rule the day. We can continually question when God's transformation of all that surrounds us will occur if it will ever occur.

It does not take much to let hope slip between our fingers in these in-between times. We have received the promise that sin and death have been defeated but we find ourselves surrounded by sin and death every day. We fear looking down at our phones lest we discover yet another violent tragedy on our streets. How long, Lord, how long? If we want to move beyond either anesthetizing ourselves to the possibility of God at work in the world or living in the midst of anxiety, we need to turn to this promise those disciples received. They are told of the arrival of the Holy Spirit, present with them and for them.

Now the Spirit is the most ineffable member of the Trinity and thus the hardest for us to pin down. But the promises of Jesus are steadfast and true. The Spirit is always at work. We do not suffer from an absence of the Spirit, our challenge is recognizing the ways in which the Spirit is moving within us and among us.

As we continue this journey between that first resurrection victory all those years ago and the culmination of that victory in the visible transformation of all we know, the only way

forward is to trust in the promise we have been given by the risen Christ, that indeed death has been defeated and the Spirit is with us. In times when visible hope is in short supply we find our steadfast hope in this promise. Death has been defeated and the Spirit is with us. In times when our lives appear to offer no sign of resurrection victory, we find our steadfast hope in this promise. Death has been defeated and the Spirit is with us. In times when we can see no sign of the movement of God, we find our steadfast hope in this promise. Death has been defeated and the Spirit is with us.

I believe the way we do this is by keeping one eye metaphorically upon the heavens and allow the great expectation of the question, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore everything?" to remain upon our lips. And our other eye is to be focused on the world around us and the mission we have been given.

We are called to be witnesses to the world and to each other. The job of a witness is to share the story of what they know that all may know the truth. We are called to share the story of God's victory over sin and death. There will be times on this long journey when we might wish to anesthetize ourselves because there is no end in sight. There will be times when we will call out "how long?" when we will actually be asking "will this ever happen?"

And in those times we will need to witness to one another. We need to remind each other that regardless of how challenging and sometimes even dark things may be at any particular moment our destination of victory together is guaranteed. We need to remind each other that the Spirit is present with us now.

Whenever Marta and I are struggling with a goal we know will come to fruition but we now not when, we will say to each other "seven minutes."

In this in-between time let us not lose sight of the victory of the resurrection. God has indeed defeated death and every failure of ours and the world's. Let us hold on to that promise and let us share it with each other on a regular basis.

And if it helps, you can always whisper to yourself, "seven minutes."

Thanks be to God. Amen.