

How Do We Live in a World Without God?  
Luke 24:44–53; Acts 1:3–14  
Sunday, May 29, 2022 (Ascension)

Let us pray: Speak a word to your people, Lord, because we are *starving* for it. And may that word bear fruit that nourishes *us* and the *world*, in Christ. Amen.

The other day I came inside after mowing the lawn, and Jen was getting dinner ready. Her phone was propped up on the counter next to her, and I could tell that she was watching the news. Jen *never* watches the news, so I knew something was going on. And as I got closer, I saw that there had been a shooting at a school in Texas. I had been immersed in work all afternoon, here at the church and then in the yard, so I had no idea that anything was going on. As I stood there trying to glean the details, Jen asked me a question that was less of a question than it was a *declaration* of sadness mixed with anger and fear. She pointed at her phone and said, “How do we live in this world?”

That question *haunted* me, because I couldn’t *answer* it. So I went upstairs to get cleaned up and to *think*. I thought about her question and this scripture and sermon, the story of Christ’s ascension, and that led me to *another* question that I knew needed to be the title and focus of this sermon: How do we live in a world without God?

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A few years ago, I came to the realization that this week, this ten day stretch that we are currently in, is the most *terrifying* week of the Christian year. Way more terrifying than Holy Week. Holy Week can be *sad* (or maybe just *solemn*), but it’s not *scary*. *This* week is *scary*. Because on Thursday, Christ ascended from the earth. Before doing so, he promised his disciples, “In a little while, you will no longer see me. But I will not leave you orphaned or abandoned. I will not leave you *alone*. God will send the Holy Spirit to be my presence with

you.” The presence of God had dwelled on earth for three years in the person of Jesus Christ. When he ascended from the earth, the presence of God *left us*. The Holy Spirit is *coming*, but that’s not until Pentecost, seven days from now. Until then, Jesus’ disciples are living in a world devoid of the presence of God. That’s terrifying. Put yourself in the disciples’ place here: Christ is gone, the Holy Spirit has not yet come, they are living in the in-between, and that had to make them feel very *alone*.

We *all* have to live in that in-between. I think this week reminded us of that, even if we couldn’t quite put words to it. We live after Christ’s death and resurrection, God’s victory over the powers of evil and sin and death in this world, and yet there is *still* evil and sin and death in this world as we wait for the time when Christ will come again to bring God’s kingdom to earth and make all things new. We live in that in-between. Reformed theology refers to it as the “already-not yet.” We have *already* been assured of Christ’s ultimate victory, but it is *not yet* a reality among us. We know that something good is coming, but it’s not here yet.

There are a lot of other ways in which we experience that *in-between* in our daily lives. We have spent the past two years living in between the *arrival* of Covid and its *end*, which we always seem to feel is right around the corner, but it’s not here yet. We live in between medical tests and diagnoses and treatments. We live in between conflict in our relationships and the resolution of that conflict. We live in between addiction and healing, where we *know* something needs to change, but we have *no idea* how it’s going to happen. We live in between war and peace, where so much hangs in the balance. At times it feels like we’re living in between mass shootings, where we’re just waiting for the next one to happen.

We are living in between Christ's departure and his return, between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of man, between the fall of creation and the redemption of all things. And that is a very hard place to live. It's a very *uncertain* place to live. There can be a lot of *fear* that comes with living in the in-between. And some people – a lot of us – *live* from that place of fear. We try to *impose* order and stability and certainty. We try to control when so much feels *out* of our control. We argue and fight. We rely on guns and violence. We rely on rigid orthodoxy, whether religious or political. Some people rely on conspiracy theories that attempt to make sense out of the senseless. We get *angry* because this isn't going the way that I *want* it to, and I don't feel like there's anything I can *do* about it or that anybody is *listening*, and we push ourselves further and further away from one another.

There are a lot of ways in which we live *fearfully* in the in-between. The question for *us* as followers of Jesus Christ is, "How can we live *faithfully* and *lovingly* in that in-between, when we can't always see any sure sign of God's presence in this world?" And I think that question is at least *somewhat* answered for us in these two stories of Christ's ascension, where we see how his disciples lived in a world without God.

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Jesus takes his disciples outside the city of Jerusalem. He blesses them and then is lifted up into the heavens. The disciples are just left standing there, staring up at the sky with their mouths hanging open. "Where'd he go?" "Is that *it*?" "Is he coming back?" All of a sudden, two men in white robes appear and say, "Why are you just standing here staring at the sky?! He's coming back the same way you saw him go." And then it says they *worshipped* him and returned to the city with *great joy*. They went to the room where they had been staying. There was Peter, John, James, Andrew, Phillip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the

Zealot, Judas son of James, Mary the mother of Jesus, Jesus' brothers, and unnamed "certain women." They devoted themselves to prayer and were continually in the temple, blessing God.

How did the disciples live in a world without God? *Together. With prayer.* Holding on to the promise, the *hope that something good was coming.* And all of that allowed them to live with *great joy.* *Joy* is not *happiness* that is determined by what's going on around you. Joy is something *deep* and *abiding* that can exist independent of your external circumstances. In this time of great uncertainty, Jesus' disciples lived with great joy because they had *each other*, they had *prayer*, and they had *hope.*

And so how do *we* live faithfully and lovingly in this in-between time, when we can't always see any sure, tangible, physical signs of God's presence with us? First, by relying on one another and living life together. When I first went on leave six months ago, you all knew about it, and the people right around me (my family) knew about it. But there came a time when I needed to let some *other* people know what was going on; close friends who don't live around here. I didn't just want to put something on social media and let *everybody* know, and I wasn't really up to making a bunch of phone calls and telling this story over and over again. So after about a week, I sent a long text message to several of my closest friends, saying *here's what's going on.*

Within an hour, one of my friends, Jon, who lives in Nashville and I've known for 20 years, called me three times. I had put my phone down and was doing something with the kids, so I didn't answer. But when I came back to my phone, he had left a voicemail saying, "I'm coming up there. I'm not *asking*, I'm *telling* you. You don't have to entertain me. I'll just be there to do whatever you're doing. If you need to pick the kids up at school, I'll ride with you. If you have a doctor's appointment, I'll wait in the car. We'll eat. We'll watch some football. I've already

got it covered at work and home. Does November 30 work?” I knew he wasn’t taking no for an answer, so I said, “Yeah, it does.” And that’s exactly what happened. He dropped everything and flew up here on very short notice, which could *not* have been cheap. He stayed for four days. And he was just *with* me. It was one of the truest gestures of friendship I have ever experienced in my life, and it was *exactly* what I needed as I navigated a very difficult in-between time, where I could not see any sign of God’s presence until I saw it in *him*.

That is what we are called to do with each other. That is what the *church* is called to be. To *be with* one another the way that God was with us in Jesus Christ. To live life together.

Whatever you are living *in between*, you are not there alone. Whatever you are struggling with or upset about right now, you do not *have* to be there alone. You *need* people around you. And you *have* a whole family of people here who love you and who *want* to walk with you. When you can’t see any sign of God’s presence around you, we are called to *be* that presence with one another. Sometimes you get to *be* it, and sometimes you get to *receive* it. But that’s what we *do*. We bear one another’s burdens. We live the in-between *together*.

We *pray*. There has been a lot of talk this week about “thoughts and prayers.” A lot of criticism of it. That’s been the typical political response to mass shootings like this, “Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families.” And people get *frustrated* with that because, they say, “You’re *praying* about it, but you’re not actually willing to *do* anything to *change* it.” I get that. Theologian Miroslav Volf once said, “There is something deeply hypocritical about *praying* for a problem you are unwilling to *resolve*.” But I was troubled by the number of posts I saw on social media from friends who are Christians and pastors that said, “No more thoughts. No more prayers. Only collective action or nothing will change.” Again, I *get* what’s behind

that. But *no more prayers* or *nothing will change*? I think that reflects a deep misunderstanding of what prayer *is*.

The purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we want. The purpose of prayer is to be properly formed in the likeness of Jesus Christ. And I think that is *the most important* thing that we can do during times like this. It's not the *only* thing that needs to be done, but it's the *most important*. Because as Christians, if we just *act* without prayerful discernment of who *God* is, who God calls *us* to be, and what God calls us to *do*, then we will be like ships without rudders that just go wherever the wind blows. We'll be seeking *our* will instead of *God's* will. Prayer is not just about asking *God* to fix the problem. It's about asking God to change *us*, so that *we* might fix the problem. Prayer does not *excuse* us from acting, it *prepares* us to act.

Prayer and action are not *contradictory*, they are *complimentary*. They go together, and we should not be doing one without the other. We shouldn't be *acting* without *praying*, and we should not be *praying* if we are not willing to *act*. Howard Thurman says, "The power of prayer is directly connected to your willingness to be part of the answer." We live faithfully and lovingly in the in-between by devoting ourselves to prayer, so that we might be formed in the likeness of Christ and bear his presence in the world.

So we have *each other*, we have *prayer*, and finally, *ultimately*, we have *hope*. Because here's the thing: we *don't* live in a world without God. We live in a post-Pentecost world, where the Spirit of God has been poured out upon all creation. Jesus doesn't walk the earth anymore, but God is present with us and at work among us through the Holy Spirit. And that's *hard*, because *spirit* isn't something we can *see*. It's not something we can *touch*. It's hard to place our trust in something, *someone* that we cannot see. So instead we place our hope in all kinds of things that

we can see. We can *see* politicians and political action, so it's *easier* to place our hope in *them*, that *they* will deliver us from this. We can *see* guns and weapons, those are tangible things that we can *hold* and *touch*, so it's easier to place our hope in *them* to keep us safe.

But like it says in our Affirmation of Faith that we will profess in just a moment, God calls us to hope for *more* than we have yet *seen*. As Paul says to the Romans, hope that is *seen* is not hope. For who hopes for what is *seen*? *We* hope for what we do *not* see. And that *hope*, Paul says, is the redemption of creation that is being brought about in Jesus Christ. Paul says, "I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." We got *glimpses* of that glory in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, but we are *still waiting* for Christ to come again and make all things new.

*Hope* is not just sitting around and doing nothing until Christ returns; giving up on this world and on each other because we are waiting for something *better*. Hope gives us the courage to act, to *live*, because we trust in the power of God above all worldly power. We trust that this Jesus, who has been taken up from us into heaven, will come in the same way as we saw him go; that Christ *will* come again to make all things new. Hope is trusting that God has not given up on this world or on *us*, but that God will fulfill God's ultimate purpose for creation. Hope gives us the courage to live and act now, because we trust that God is with us, that God loves us and cares for us, in life and in death; that there is nothing we can *do*, nothing that can happen *to us* that will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Hope is, in the words of Thomas Merton, the ability to trust God *always*, "though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Hope is, in the words of Julian of Norwich, that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Maybe not *today*. Maybe not *tomorrow*. Maybe not *20 years* from now. But one day, all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Until then, how do we live in this world? We devote ourselves to each other, we devote ourselves to prayer (active discernment and discerned action), and we devote ourselves to the hope that, in Christ, a new world is possible – indeed it is *coming* – even if we can’t see it right now. We have seen it in Christ. And we will see it again.