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Luke 24:44-53

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:15-23

May 29, 2022
Ascension Sunday

This morning, I want us to take time to do some difficult work. Difficult work that will require each of us to dig deep within our hearts and rethink some long held opinions about the world we live in and about one another. So...consider yourselves duly warned.

But, first, let me start by telling you about my drive down route 6 the other day. As I was driving west, I passed four turtles crossing the road. (Not all in a line to be sure but about every mile or two I had to slow down and swerve to ensure that each of those turtles had the best chance to get to the other side. Now, it's not uncommon to pass one turtle here and there but on this particular afternoon, I passed four. And so I couldn't help but notice the similarities between these four determined little creatures.

The first thing I noticed is that they had a goal in mind and it was clear where they were going. Step by step...they trudged along. The second is that they shot straight. They didn't zigzag or take a detour. They stayed the course pointing in the direction of their goal. And, third, they all, without hesitation, stuck their neck out, striving with all their might to face down the dangerous path ahead with resilience and courage.

They had a goal. They shot straight. And, without hesitation, they stuck their necks out.

It's hard not to love the grit of a turtle. Against all odds, at great risk to themselves, they take on an improbable journey. And, from our vantage point we know how improbable that journey is. It's a long way to the other side of the road and the dangers seem insurmountable.

I've continued to think about the qualities of those turtles this week and how their slow determination in the face of incredible adversity made the difference between staying stagnant, somewhere they didn't want to be, and getting to where they were called to be.

Getting to where we are called to be is at the heart of our readings this week. And this is where I want us to sit with some discomfort. It will be important this morning, as we consider where we are going, to acknowledge the reasons we may choose to stay where we are, where we don't want to be, or where we may refuse to go.

After this past week, faced with yet another school shooting, grieving with the families who lost their beautiful children, I want us to consider what God is calling forth within us in this moment. What is calling us, collectively and individually? Because I have to say...it looks like collectively we are stuck back on the other side of the road, staying where we are, where we shouldn't

want to be, and refusing to consider something better for ourselves and for the world. We are afraid to stick our necks out and take our own collective improbably journey.

I am going to make a big ask of you all this morning. I want you all to look ahead. At the other side of the road and ask yourself...what does it look like? What does it look like to eliminate senseless violence? What does it look like to work together on things that once divided us? What does it look like to find common ground on issues that could help others thrive? What does it look like to build the kind of world that Jesus dreamed of? A world without hate, without accusations and excuses, a world of bold determination and love?

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he left this world in our hands. He had done his teaching. He had made the greatest sacrifices. He had stood up to the powerful systems and people who had divided the world around him. He gave of himself, selflessly and courageously. In Acts, we are told that his disciples asked him when he would restore the kingdom. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" That was their question. What are you going to do Jesus? And, Jesus, said, it isn't for me to restore the kingdom...it's for you to restore.

⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." You will do the work. I am leaving this world in your hands. Take care of it. Take care of one another. Walk across that road at some risk to yourself...because this is your calling. You aren't called to keep things as they are. That's not what I came for. I came so that you could create something better.

How are we doing? When you look around, do you see the kind of world Jesus entrusted us to create?

Because the absolute truth is this...Jesus had a goal. He shot straight. And he stuck his neck out when it mattered so that we, you and me, could live in freedom and peace. That was his message to the disciples and that is his message to us. To not just take those gifts of freedom and peace for ourselves but to make sure that every single one of God's beloved children may also share in that same freedom and peace.

And yet, our world seems perpetually stuck on the side of the road, immobile, stagnant, fearful, selfish. Looking ahead but afraid to step forward. Coming up with all kinds of excuses as to why we can't get to the other side. Fighting with those who have different opinions. Begrudging having to give up a little of themselves in order to help someone else. Afraid of what it might mean if things have to change.

But, if we stay on the side of the street we are right now, Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension have taught us nothing.

Let me give you something to consider. Jesus didn't ascend and divide us into democrats and republicans. Jesus didn't ascend to divide us into gun advocates or gun reformers. Jesus didn't

ascend to divide us into pro-life and pro-choice. Jesus didn't ascend to divide us into black and white, gay or straight, rich or poor. That's not the kind of world Jesus left in our hands. Jesus ascended and left us with one simple command...that we love one another. Period.

I want you to try something in the weeks ahead. I want you to get rid of any politicized language you have been carrying around. Get rid of divisive language and replace it with loving language. Stop saying things like those democrats are ruining our country or those republicans are the cause of this gun violence. Just stop it.

Because every time we use statements and categories that create a wider divide in our country and in our communities, we are digging the ditches on each side of the road even deeper. And we will never cross them to the place we are truly called to be. Those ditches have become our stumbling blocks.

My son, Camden, graduated from St. Christopher's School this past Friday. After 13 years, he walked across that stage to get his diploma and the boys of the graduating class recited the prayer they have said since they began at St. Chris. The prayer says these words:

*Give me clean hands, clean words and clean thoughts.
 Help me stand for the hard right against the easy wrong.
 Save me from habits that harm:
 Teach me to work as hard and play as fair in thy sight alone as if all the world saw;
 Forgive me when I am unkind, and help me to forgive those who are unkind to me;
 Keep me ready to help others at some cost to myself;
 Send me chances to do a little good every day and so grow more like Christ. Amen.*

Help me stand for the hard right against the easy wrong.
 Keep me ready to help others at some cost to myself;

That's what it means to cross the road. To have a goal. To shoot straight. To stick your neck out. Even if it is hard. Because nothing less will ever get us to the other side, together, in community, grounded in love.

Jesus ascended but expected us to keep going. And to keep going, we must have the resiliency and the determination to risk what others say cannot be done, to be ready to walk the hard path and not take the easy out. Jesus calls forth within each and every one of us this kind of bold living. It's the only way to live that will truly place value on Jesus' life and teaching.

So...set a goal. Believe that we can do better as a nation, removed of political and social dividers that create deep scars in the fabric of who we are. Believe that we can work together to figure out a safer, more compassionate world for our children. Believe that you can be a part of that change.

Shoot straight. Keep God at the center. We know what Jesus taught so live like it! When you get tempted to fall into camps or accuse this side or that side, this group or that group as being the source of the problem, stop yourself. Right when the divisive language starts to boil over, put God right back in the center of it all and love one another. Let no other detour take you away from that one central command.

And finally, stick your neck out. Take a risk even if it costs you something. Do it anyway because this work of following Christ didn't promise ease but it did promise change. Good change. The kind of change that brings freedom and peace out of the depths of suffering and pain. So stand for the hard right over the easy wrong.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses. Thanks be to God. Amen.