

I

When I was eight years old, our family took a trip to San Francisco. We stayed in a beautiful high-rise hotel, with these incredible glass elevators that I loved to ride. One morning, while my parents were still getting ready for the day, I must have been bored and antsy, so my father gave me some quarters to go and buy a Coke from the vending machine.

It honestly didn't occur to me that in such a fancy hotel there were vending machines on every floor. So I went down the hall and took the glass elevator all the way down to the lobby. I looked around for a vending machine for several minutes and didn't find one. So I took the elevator all the way back up to our floor, which took several more minutes.

By the time I reached our floor again, I had been gone probably a good 15 or 20 minutes on an errand that should have taken no more than two. As I stepped off the elevator, there stood my father, with a look on his face that I had never seen before or since. And instantly I knew that I was in deep, deep trouble, because I hadn't been where I was supposed to be.

II

We've all been there, haven't we? Whether innocently or intentionally, we've all found ourselves in places we were not supposed to be. We've made a wrong turn somewhere, or we've just innocently wandered off. Or, perhaps,

we have intentionally crossed boundaries that we knew we were not supposed to cross, and suddenly, we find ourselves where we were not supposed to be.

III

Did you ever notice that the same thing keeps happening to Jesus? When our text opens this morning, he's not where he was supposed to be.

He was supposed to be dead and buried and sealed in a borrowed tomb. But early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb to finish the burial work that had been interrupted by the Sabbath, and they found that the stone had been rolled away, and the tomb stood empty. And as they stood there trying to puzzle it out, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood next to them and asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here."

In other words, Jesus was not where he was supposed to be. And when we come to our text today, it's been forty days since the women came back from the tomb to preach the first Easter sermon. For forty days, Jesus has been with the disciples preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God. It's not Jesus' ghost or doppelganger or avatar. This is Jesus in the flesh. Luke makes it clear that he still has the holes in his hands and the wound in his side. He's still eating breakfast and doing all the things that alive people do. He was supposed to be crucified, dead, buried,

and sealed up in the tomb. But he's not where he was supposed to be.

And a quick glance back over the Gospel of Luke shows that this is something of a pattern for Jesus. For example, he wasn't even born in the right place. Important people were supposed to be born in Jerusalem, the capital city, home of both the Temple and the king's palace. In Matthew's gospel, when the Magi see the star, they go first to Jerusalem based on that very assumption. But according to both Matthew and Luke, Jesus was born in the wrong place – the backwater village of Bethlehem.

When Jesus was 12 years old, his parents presented him in the Temple, as was the custom. But his parents were halfway back to Nazareth when they discovered that Jesus wasn't where he was supposed to be. He was still in the Temple, teaching and preaching and astonishing the rabbis with his wisdom and insight.

When Jesus became a rabbi himself, he was still showing up in all the wrong places. There are very clear laws in the Scripture about what is clean and what is unclean, but Jesus had this habit of constantly breaking bread with outsiders and tax collectors and people of questionable moral character.

And so when we come to our text today, forty days after Easter, forty days after Jesus, who was very much dead, but now very much alive, has been preaching and teaching about the

kingdom of God, the disciples have all come together.

And they've got some ideas about where Jesus ought to be. Remember, for nearly 1,000 years, their nation had been ruled by foreign empires. First it was the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Greeks, and now, the Romans. It's been nearly 1,000 years since their nation has been an independent, autonomous, self-governing country.

And the disciples are convinced that Jesus is the Messiah – the long-promised, long-awaited savior who, according to the Hebrew Scriptures, will save his people and rule over Israel forever. And so they ask, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

It's a perfectly reasonable question, asked by a people who are weary of war, weary of violence, weary of unjust taxation, a people who are so very tired of the current administration and who are more than ready for a regime change.

The disciples are ready to see Jesus where, in their minds, he is supposed to be – ruling from Jerusalem over an independent, free nation of Israel, a political leader in the tradition of his ancestor King David.

But once again, Jesus confounds their expectations. He says, "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 in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And then the strangest thing happens. Like a child who has just released a helium balloon, Jesus begins to ascend into the sky – higher and higher and higher – until he’s just a speck, and then he’s beyond the clouds.

And finally, he is right where he was always meant to be, risen in glory, risen above every empire, risen above every kingdom, risen above every principality, risen above every system of domination and oppression, risen above every power that can ever hope to hurt or destroy us.

And the poor disciples are just standing there, craning their necks, squinting into the sky, trying to make sense of it all. And suddenly, once again, these two men in white robes just appear out of nowhere.

“Men of Galilee! Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

I don’t know about you, but these two strange men in dazzling white clothes are starting to get on my nerves. These two keep showing up in the middle of these miraculous events and start asking dumb questions – Why do you look for the living among the dead? Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?

And then they keep offering cryptic and confusing answers.

He is not here – he has been raised.

This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

But each time these strange men show up, people snap out of it and get moving. The women return from the tomb to preach the first Easter sermon. The eleven remaining disciples get busy selecting a replacement for Judas. Each time these strange men in dazzling white clothes show up, people get busy.

#### IV

And perhaps these men dressed in white have a word for you this morning, my sister, my brother. Perhaps, when it comes to the things of God, you’ve been suffering from what one preacher calls “the paralysis of analysis.”

Perhaps, like the women who went to the cemetery early on the first day of the week, you’ve been staring into an empty tomb trying to wrap your head around the concept of the resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps, like the men of Galilee who watched Jesus ascend into the sky, you’ve been peering up into the clouds, trying to make logical sense out of these stories.

Or perhaps you’ve been caught up with this week’s latest headlines. Perhaps you’ve been so preoccupied with the antics of the empire, or so consumed by anger and resentment at

the current regime that you've become stuck.

And along come these divine messengers, saying, "What are you doing? Why are you standing here staring into a tomb, looking for the living among the dead? Why are you standing here, staring into the sky? Why do you go looking at the headlines looking for a reason to get angry? That's no way to live! Get a move on!"

The Christian faith is not a set of theological premises to be accepted or rejected. The Christian faith is not a social club to be joined or declined. The old hymn doesn't say, "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, and they'll know we are Christians by our Book of Confessions and our Book of Order. No, they'll know we are Christians by our love. They will know we are Christians by our *actions*."

Christ has ascended into heaven, and as we say in the creed, from thence he will come again. And in the meantime, you and I've got work to do. Over 500 years ago, one of our ancestors in the faith said this:

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are

the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."<sup>1</sup>

Take a look at your hands. Take a look at your feet. If you will let them, this very day, those can be the very hands and feet of Christ.

But beware. Because if you follow Christ, his feet might just carry you to a place you're not supposed to be. If you follow Christ, your hands might end up breaking bread with people that you were never supposed to meet. If you follow Christ, you might end up confounding people's expectations of you. If you follow Christ, his feet will defy the death-dealing ways of the empire and walk you right into the kingdom of God.

## V

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

"Lord, is this the time when you will make our country great again?"

"Lord, is this the time when you will make our church full of young families with cute children who also have lots of disposable income that they just can't wait to give away to our church?"

Those are reasonable questions, asked by faithful people who long for good things. But, says gentle Jesus, those are the wrong questions. We are

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa of Avila, "Chris Has No Body," [https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPr](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body_shtml)

[ayers/Teresa Of Avila Christ Has No Body\\_shtml](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body_shtml), accessed May 23, 2019.

not to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

But here's what we do know. Jesus has ascended into heaven, but we are not alone. We have received power from the Holy Spirit to carry forward the mission of God. And Jesus tells us that the mission of God extends far beyond the walls of our church building. The mission of God extends far beyond the borders of our state and nation. Jesus tells us that the mission of God is bigger and greater and grander than anything you or I could ever imagine.

And so may we witness. May we testify to what we have seen and heard and believe to be true. May our faith be one of action. May we get busy being the ears and eyes and hands and feet of Christ here in Athens, and indeed, to the very ends of the earth, until he comes again.

To God be the glory.

Amen.