

A Time to Remember; A Time to Move On

May 24, In the Year of Our LORD, 2009

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gloversville, New York

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Acts of the Apostles 1:15-17, 21-26

[stand there for twenty seconds saying and doing nothing]

They were sitting and standing around *doing* nothing. Do you remember when we read last month in the twentieth chapter of the Gospel of John of the disciples sitting and standing around after Jesus' death locked (read: hiding) in an "upper room" waiting for ... what? For something to happen, for someone to do something, for someone to say something, give directions, ... They probably did some remembering – sadness mixed with and joy – “do you remember the time Jesus ...” “do you remember the time Thomas asked Him, ...” “yeah, and there was the time the two of you wanted to be the ones to sit on His right and left hands when He came into His glory – and we found out what you two were up to, and ...”

There is the kind of remembrances, story telling, recollections that just ... well, the remembering just sort of “sits there” and, well, nothing happens.

In the case of John 20, in the accounts of the day of Resurrection and some days that followed, Jesus appeared to those disciples, reminded them of His love for them, bestowed God's peace on them, and gave them reason to believe, reason to move on to the next parts of their spiritual journeys.

Today, we come to the first Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. This past Monday evening, before members of the Adult Bible Class shared the verse we read this morning, they took a look at the readings for this past Thursday? Thursday? Yes, as in Ascension Thursday, the end of the forty days Jesus spent on earth before leaving the disciples for good. Remember, the Dan Brown “Da Vinci Code” version of Jesus surviving long after that, marrying Mary Magdalene and fathering children is *fiction*. On Thursday, we read that Jesus departed – for good (as in, nearly two thousands years so far, good).

So – we come to today's reading and the disciples are ... I could just cut and paste some of my first paragraph here [think I will do just that] the disciples were “sitting and standing around... in an ‘upper room’ – waiting for ... what? For something to happen, for someone to do something, for someone to say something, give directions, ...”

This time, Jesus did not appear to them to show them His hands and feet and bestow on them His peace. This time, there was no coming back. This time they just had to jolly well wait ... for what? Let us recall that “little” issue called hindsight. *We know* the disciples only had to wait ten days for the Day of Pentecost, the full, public, if not showy arrival of the Holy Spirit, that event we celebrate *next Sunday* as the birthday of the church, when as many of as can will wear red, the color for Pentecost. *We know* that part, but as for the disciples, all they knew was that Jesus was not there. It is true that on the previous occasion, had they thought about it, had they really listened to Jesus' words, they would have heard what Jesus had predicted about rising from the

dead. This time, had they listened, they would have realized He was *not* coming back. Granted, there were those who heard “I will return with power” and interpreted that to mean that *Jesus* would return even though when Jesus said that, He was talking about the Holy Spirit, ... but back to the facts:

For the third time, ... the disciples were just sitting and standing around after Jesus’ departure in an “upper room” – waiting for ... what? For something to happen, for someone to do something, for someone to say something, give directions,

This time, *Peter stood up and* ... it fell to Peter, the first among equals, for Roman Catholics, the first Pope, ... it was Peter’s task to get the disciples to move on, to move from merely remembering the previous three years of ministry so that they might be fully prepared for what lay ahead. As we read today, Peter decided the best thing to do was to get practical. The number of disciples was down to eleven (the gap in today’s reading from the first chapter, the omitted verses, gives the account of Judas’ suicide – Judas who, while a betrayer, had no idea the reason to believe the result would be Jesus’ death) – so it was time to elect another – and Peter laid out some qualifications by which that would be determined. It is intriguing that the requirement was that the man (no, Mary Magdalene was not considered – chauvinists!) must have accompanied them for the *entire* time of Jesus’ ministry. The fact that there were *two* nominations means that my mental image of Jesus walking and talking as they went from town to town with *twelve* other men needs to be revised – for now we know there were at *least* fourteen. Anyway, how easy it is to digress ...

Matthias was chosen as the new twelfth disciple. Footnote: in the remaining twenty-seven chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, we never encounter Matthias again. Digression

In my father (the layman, my grandfather was the ordained minister) – in my father’s notes are copies of his sermons – and the one he preached more often than any other, that he reworked from time to time, was based on this passage of scripture and entitled “Peter Stood up.” Of course, I couldn’t find those notes this week when I wanted to look at them, but as I recall, my father’s point was that *someone* stood up, *someone* realized there was work, ministry, mission to be accomplished – and as often as we humans like to sit and stand around waiting for someone else to stand up and lead or give directions or tell us what comes next, someone needs to stand up and

This past Monday during the Adult Bible Class was the first time since my father’s death that I thought of this passage in the context of my father’s use for sermons and it occurred to me that my father was a bit like Peter on the day that Peter stood up. My father was never a man to sit or stand around and let opportunities pass by unattended. Oh, he was very much a person of process. He elicited input from others. He was very much the congregationalist, determined to make sure everyone had their say, but he was also determined to get a matter going – and, as the rest of us remember, one to make sure there was never a silent moment. He *always* had something to say, as in *always*. God, but could he talk!

Remembering. How interesting it is that recollections can be passive or active, can just “sit there” or can motivate, can be cause for mere contemplation or can be the impetus for action. On a weekend that includes the official observation of Memorial Day, that choice is ours. It is always a choice for people of faith, but let us think of it for just a moment in the context of our

history as a people and as a nation. Memorial Day can be a solemn, appropriately so, ... a solemn occasion to recall the sacrifice of so many over the course of our nation's life or it can *also* be a time to take real action, make real, productive decisions that wars might end, the cause of wars might be mitigated, and we might work for justice, peace, and grace for all peoples, so that strife might be avoided in the future.

With the civil war in Sri Lanka apparently at an end (concluding while we were in worship last Sunday), will the Sri Lankan government, as promised, give some real political power to the Tamil minority? Just as importantly, will those of the Tamil minority accept their role as a *minority* that can't, frankly, expect to always get anything at the expense of the majority. As a political theoretician (I don't call it political science anymore because Sally says politics is *not* a science), as a political "animal" (how is that?), I realize the Tamil Tiger/Sri Lankan situation is more complicated than what I just implied, but my point is that Memorial Day observances need to be more than just a time to remember, they need to be a time to "learn war no more."

Don't get me wrong – we need to listen to the "war stories." Tom Brokaw's "The Greatest Generation" is both an easy and hard "read" – easy in that the vignettes are short and to the point and hard in that they are real stories about real people. This past week, I finished Ishmael Beah's "A Long Way Gone," the account by a young man from Sierra Leone of his life as a child soldier in the bitter civil war in that country in the 1990s. Parts of that account are haunting, horrific, ... unimaginable – so much so, that no one can read or hear an account of killing as in Ishmael's book and not ask that timeless question, "where was God in all of that?"

Where was God in Gettysburg, San Juan Hill, the Verdun Forest, on Iwo Jima, Normandy, the eastern front, the Ardennes, Beirut, Baghdad? ... The answer is that God was and is still there, as God is present in all circumstances of life and death. It is just that God's ways and God's visions were and are supplanted by the ways, so often erring ways, of humans to whom have been given the free will to follow in God's ways – *or*, as is all too often the case, *not*.

It is because of the *not* – because of the tendency to act in sinful, broken, human ways, that we as a people can not settle for mere passive remembering, that we need to remember and then move on to better ways, remember and learn from the past so as to not make the same mistakes. We need to remember the good in people, the willingness to sacrifice. We need to recall the lives of people who lived with grace and courage, the lives of those willing to stand up and proclaim that to remember the past is to learn from the past, change that of the past that needs to be changed, so that justice might reign, all on this globe might know freedom from want, that ministry and mission might be actions and not just fancy verbiage, and that instead of sitting or standing around waiting for someone else to start doing, start changing the world, we might be the ones to follow Peter's example.

Peter remembered. Peter stood up. Peter did something. So should we, ...

Amen.