

“What’s Next?” (Acts 1:6-14) Easter 7/Confirmation, May 4, 2008

One night a couple of years ago, I was driving up to Spokane. You see, first thing the next morning I was supposed to take a continuing education class, so I thought it would be smart to spend the night up there instead of taking off at the crack of dawn. In theory, that was smart, but the weather that night gave me second thoughts -- first rain, followed by kind of a slushy snow. Now, even that wasn't so bad, but then a big truck sped by and sprayed muddy slush all over my windshield. I was blinded! Totally! Couldn't see a thing! Just for a moment, mind you, but that moment felt like an eternity! Not being able to see where you are going. Not knowing whether the road turns. Not knowing what you might run into up ahead. It lasted just for a moment, but what a helpless, anxious moment! Not one I would ever care to repeat!

Of course, I probably will – in some form or another. Life is full of such moments. In fact, many times of transition are just like that. You've completed one thing, one phase, one chapter of your life, but then...what's next? At the moment, you can't really see that for sure. And it can be scary, not being able to see which way the road is heading. It can be scary not knowing what you might run into up ahead. Or, if not scary, it can at least be unsettling – especially for those of us who like all our ducks in a row and quacking in unison! A transition time can feel like an eternity when you're not sure what's next!

I suspect you know exactly what I'm talking about. Most of us here have been through such times. Some transitions have been born of pain – the loss of a job, the break-up of a marriage, the onset of disease, the death of a loved one. Then too, some transitions have come with age – having the last child leave home, facing retirement, realizing you're slowing down and can't do all the things you used to. And...some transitions even result from success. After years and years of study, you finally get your degree. Great! But now what's next? After working and working toward some special goal, you finally achieve it. Great! But now what's next? And the list could go on and on, couldn't it? Life is full of transitions great and small. In fact, right now you Confirmands are facing one. After four years of retreats and study and sermon notes and projects, the baby days of your Christian life are over. A lot of it was fun. A lot of it was work. But now it's over. With your vows to follow Christ, you will become adult members of the congregation. And what will that be like exactly? What direction will your Christian life take? What challenges, what temptations, what opportunities will you run into up ahead? Can't really see that yet, can you? And that's how it is with transitions. But whatever their cause, they have this in common: uncertainty; uncertainty about the future; uncertainty and all the helpless, anxious feelings that provokes – feelings from not knowing what's next.

Now, different people handle transition times in different ways. For many, it's tempting to withdraw from others, put life on hold, and try to handle things all on their own. Anyone who has tried that approach will probably tell you it doesn't

work real well. What would work better? In our text, we see how the disciples handled the transition time after the Ascension, and their approach worked very well – well enough to make it worth exploring further.

Picture the scene. After following Jesus for years, these disciples have watched Him reach the heights of popularity, only to see Him fall into the hands of His enemies; they've watched Him suffer death on a cross, only to see Him rise again on Easter. It's been quite a roller coaster ride! And the time they've spent with Jesus since Easter has been wonderful. But now it's over. They've been given their long-term mission: **"You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** They've also been given short-term instructions: **"Remain in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."** But now Jesus is gone. They're just standing there slack-jawed, staring up at blank sky. Now it's over. The earthly ministry of Jesus, the physical presence of Jesus, the familiar fellowship with Jesus – over. So now? What? What's next?

Can you picture their uncertainty? Sure. And can you imagine how they feel? Anxious, helpless, confused, vulnerable, overwhelmed. So now look at what they do next. Look at how they handle this transition time. Not by withdrawing from each other. Not by putting life on hold. Not by trying to handle things all on their own. Not at all! In fact, they do quite the opposite.

For starters, they ***stick together***. And that's a good instinct! They know that they're in this together and that they're stronger together, however tempted they might feel to withdraw. In fact, they're just practicing what Jesus taught them. By the very act of calling them to follow Him as a group, not as individuals; by driving home the message to love one another, to serve one another, to be there for one another, Jesus taught them: stick together! So they do.

And we need to do that, too – especially in transition times, but just as a general rule. There is a reason why Jesus organized His followers as a church, not as individual practitioners. There is a reason why He commanded that we be baptized into a fellowship, a spiritual family. Because we're in this together and we're stronger together than we would be going it alone.

Oh, I know the old line: *You don't have to go to church to be a Christian.* And you know what? It won't wash. At least, not if you mean to be a faithful Christian. For starters, it runs up against the commandment to keep the Sabbath and the explicit teaching in Hebrews, **"Do not forsake the gathering together of yourselves, as is the habit of some."** But even that aside, it misses the whole point of Christian fellowship – that we're stronger together. What's more, it misses the reason why Jesus Himself called us to stick together. Because that's the only way we'll grow where we need to grow. Because that's the only way we'll learn to love the way He wants us to love. Because that's the only way we can witness effectively to a skeptical world. Together. By sticking together.

Of course, some may be thinking: *That's all well and good in theory, but I remember going through a rough transition time, and the church wasn't there for me.* One hears this complaint often enough, so I think this would be a good time to address it. The church is human, that's for sure. The church is made up of people, so of course it has its flaws. But when we think about what "the church" should have done, let's remember it's not like the church is some institution apart from you or me. We are the church. All of us together. And it's not like the church is some spiritual supermarket, where you're the customer and others are supposed to serve you. We're all in this together. We all need to stick together. And when I say "stick together," think what sticking requires. Not sitting at home waiting for folks to come to *you* with support. Not keeping your needs all bottled up inside and expecting others to figure it out. Not even coming to church and standing off by yourself – arms crossed, face down, with this attitude practically tattooed on your forehead: *Come on! Say something! Whatever it is won't be good enough!* That's not sticking together. It's really just a way of withdrawing. And that's not the way to find what we'd *get* by sticking together. Seek out fellowship and we'll find it. Seek out support and we'll find it. Take equal responsibility for sticking together and we'll find the benefits. We're in this together. We're stronger together. We need to stick together – especially when we're not sure what's next.

So that's one thing we see in the disciples. A second thing is that the disciples do what they can under the circumstances. They might feel like just putting their lives on hold. They might feel like just twiddling their thumbs until they are "**clothed with power from on high.**" But who knows when that will happen? Do they want to waste time just waiting? No. There are things they can do during the transition time, and they do them – like choosing a replacement for Judas. That doesn't have to wait until the transition time is over. Actually, it will help them get ready for what's next. So they resist the temptation to put their lives on hold, and they do what they can under the circumstances.

We'll find that helpful, too. I sure have. Case in point: in my sermon last Thursday, I mentioned using time on jury duty to sketch out the whole Basic Belief Seminar. But actually, there's a bit more to the story than that. You see, jury duty came at a very bad time. Both the associate pastor and youth minister had just left, and I was pretty much holding down the fort on my own. Two weeks of having to be on call, and then two weeks of having to be at the court house – let's just say that's not real conducive to quality ministry! And they wouldn't let me off. What was I going to do? It was bad enough having to cancel various Bible classes. But imagine all the what-ifs buzzing in my brain, like: *What if there's an emergency? What if someone dies?* Plus, I needed to write a sermon...and plan this Basic Belief Seminar. What was I going to do? Well...it was actually my administrator, Gloria, who suggested: *Why don't you take some work along with you?* That hadn't occurred to me. *Do what you can under the circumstances!* And it actually worked out well. I got a lot done, and I had something better to focus on than what-if this, what-if that.

Folks, this really can be helpful – even when the transition time is filled with pain. My cousin Heinz, for instance, was planning to sell his bakery and retire when his wife died suddenly of a heart attack. Dealing with all that, you might think having to run a bakery would be a big burden – adding insult to injury. But he actually found it therapeutic. Just having something else to focus on. Just doing what you can. It wasn't an escape so much, but it kept him from sinking while he mourned his wife. And so many others in different circumstances have discovered the same thing. It is never wise to put our lives on hold. It doesn't really work. It's better to do what you can under the circumstances!

And, of course, the most valuable thing you can do under the circumstances is **keep close to God in prayer** – which we also see the disciples doing. Luke says: **“they were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.”** Again, it might be tempting to try to handle things on your own. When the transition is born of pain, some might even feel like turning away from God. But friends, how does that help? Even if you're upset with God, it helps more to tell Him. And where will you find the strength to make it through the transition? Where will you find the power to heal and be ready for what's next? From Him who promised, **“My grace will be sufficient for you.”** From Him who promised, **“My power will be made perfect in your weakness.”** From Him who promised, **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”** So the disciples aren't just being pious here, they're being smart **“constantly devoting themselves to prayer.”** It's a great resource, you know. It taps us into the ultimate resource, God. Small wonder John Bunyan said, *“You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”* And that's especially true when you're not sure what's next.

So...stick together, do what you can, keep close to God in prayer. That's what the disciples do for the next ten days. Then comes Pentecost. They're clothed with power. Their mission is off to a great start. At last the transition is over, but you know, even if it would take a lot longer, this would still be a wise approach – and it's well worth us taking to heart.

We don't have to like transition times, but we do have to deal with them. Life is full of such moments. [\[In fact, for you Confirmands, this is one of them.\]](#) Yes, one day the road will end, the journey will end, for we'll have arrived safe and sound in heaven. But until that final transition, we'll be wise to do as the disciples did after the Ascension – stick together, do what we can, keep close to God in prayer – especially in those moments when we're not sure what's next. Amen.