

A Sent Church

Luke 24:44-53

May 21, 2023

Last summer, driving down a winding mountain road in western North Carolina, a friend and I spotted a billboard with a giant Bible pictured on it. The Bible was open, and the words inscribed in it appear nowhere in scripture but perhaps are well-known to you, nonetheless. "If your life ended on this road, do you know where you would spend eternity?" Now, my first thought was to drive more carefully as the road curved around steep cliffs on both sides. But then—I will confess—the sign upset me.

I've been thinking about the roots of that feeling as I've prepared my sermon for today, and here's my conclusion: the message of that billboard is too small for the gospel. It trades on fear and not hope. It ignores God's plan of redemption for *this* world. "See the home of God is among mortals," the Book of Revelation records.

It is Ascension Sunday. Today the Church remembers the miraculous moment, forty days after Easter morning, when Jesus rose *again*, this time into God's presence, into heaven. It is a day when we might be tempted to focus our attention solely on eternal matters or to ask the kinds of metaphysical questions that challenge our scientifically inclined, modern brains.

Last Sunday evening, our six-year-old son Ben asked me one of those questions. "Dad, somebody's mommy is in heaven. How do you get to heaven? Where even is it?"

It was clear to me off the bat that this was not a theological question. He wanted a map, an address to his final destination. He wanted his friend to get to visit their mom on Mother's Day, and he wanted to be able to give them directions. I've learned that the best

way to respond to these kinds of questions is to toss it back into Ben's court, and so I did. "Well, Ben, where do you think heaven is?"

A brief pause, but then: "It's with God and your family. Dad, I don't want to talk about it anymore." I think he knew he was letting me off the hook. An act of grace.

But the question remains. Where did Jesus go on that day when Luke records that he was "carried up into heaven"? We don't know. We don't know because the gospel writer shifts his attention to the group of followers standing, watching from below. They may have their feet on the ground, but according to Ben's definition they are not far from heaven, surrounded by those they love the most. Jesus has opened their minds and their hearts. He has made promises to them. He has called them witnesses. And then, he sends them. Apostles. That's Luke's preferred word, the Greek noun built on a verb, *apostello*, which translates, "to send."

The Church of Jesus Christ is no stationary body or settled place. We are—from the very beginning—a movement. We are those whom God sends. And our work has only just begun.

At Second Church, for nearly two years we have been focused on two distinct yet related images for what our congregation is called to be in this moment. Both of these images are featured in this morning's scripture. Both center on sent-ness.

We are called to be a church for the city.

Did you catch what the disciples do after Jesus has ascended into heaven? They worship, and then they return to Jerusalem. They go to the city. Luke's second

volume (that we call the Book of Acts) describes what they do there. They fully immerse themselves in the care of their neighbors—particularly those at greatest risk and in deepest need. They provide for the poor. They welcome the outcast. They build a Church to serve the place they've been sent.

They build a Church to serve the place they've been sent. That is our call as well. Here at Second, we have identified areas of need right here in Washington Township—the place we've been sent. Food insecurity. Housing instability. Educational inequity. As a church for the city, we must do what our ancestors did in Jerusalem: respond to the needs of our neighbors in practical ways.

Providing food for those who are *hungry now*, and advocating for programs that strike at the root causes of hunger. Building and repairing homes with our partner ministries for those who need them *now, and* confronting a system that leads to record numbers of evictions in our state. Mentoring and tutoring students in local schools who need the support *now, and* addressing the lack of quality early education for low-income neighbors that only exacerbates the achievement gap all the way through high school.

To be a sent church for the city is to care as much about where our neighbors will spend the night as where we will spend eternity. Indeed, it is to come to believe that the two are intricately related.

Second, we are called to be a charging station for God's people.

As Jesus is carried up into heaven, he lifts his hands, and he blesses his disciples. This blessing is more than mere metaphor. It is the enactment of a Pentecost promise, the gift of the Holy Spirit that will fill and equip the apostles for the work they are called to do. Before they are sent out, they are charged up. And so, here we aim to offer a charge to all who participate in the life of our church. Solely by God's grace, something happens here that fills our spirits.

We live in a time of such depletion. Exhaustion. Fatigue. Weariness. Anxiety. Perhaps we have finally learned what does not work. Short-term dopamine surges from social media that only drive our addiction. Ceaseless striving and acquisition of more, always more, of every resource. Competition with our colleagues and our neighbors. The kind of rage that makes us feel utterly alive for a moment and then completely drained for days. Perhaps we are discovering again our need for a blessing that we do not earn and which we cannot hoard. The gift of worship, the experience of life in community, the beauty of a world we did not create, the unmerited grace that comes from unconditional love, these are the gifts of God that charge us up for living in complex times.

My prayer is that you leave this place each week not depleted but deployed, not exhausted but energized. I hope you can simply allow yourself to receive a gift, to receive a charge. In the sacred sound of music. In renewing laughter and friendship. In discovery of your God-given gifts and the opportunities to use them. In a purpose beyond self-service. In prayer during deep grief and sadness. In voices lifted up and honored.

Two weeks ago, I received an email from a father whose daughter had read scripture in worship that Sunday. His daughter is eight years old. Kevin writes, "A few years ago I was asked to share for a group of new members what it is about this church that keeps me coming back. (So here goes.) This church continues to meet me where I am. As our life stage has progressed from a married couple, to new parents, to a family of five with grandparents in tow, this church continues to provide us opportunities to grow together. The kind of growth that matters. The kind of growth that we will remember. Although last week she may have needed an additional riser to be seen over the lectern, our daughter grew that day. And so did our roots in this community."

Friends, God's kingdom depends on a Church sent by the Spirit to serve, charged up for the challenge of living faithfully. It has been said that when Jesus

arrived in heaven after his ascension, he hurried to the throne of God to report on all of his adventures on earth. The angels and the archangels gathered around and listened intently. When Jesus got to the part about entrusting the work of God's kingdom to his followers, one of the angels asked in horror, "Oh my Lord! What if they don't do it? What if they fail?"

Jesus answered, "I have no other plan."