

Acts 1:6-14

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36

What is it like to retreat to our upper room?

I bet this time last year, we did not anticipate this question. This time last year, it was the eve of Memorial Day; we were taking trips to Walmart to stock up on cookout supplies, we were driving to the lake or the beach, and we were seeing family and friends in church and in the market and in our homes and everywhere we went.

Last year, I had just moved across the country to right outside of New York City, where I was doing my chaplaincy internship in a safety-net hospital in Queens. Queens, then, was bustling; now, New York City is empty and desolate like a scene from an apocalypse movie. Instead of an upper room, I spent my evenings in the guest suite of a rectory of an Episcopal church on Long Island; binge-watching TV and catching up on reading from my first year of seminary.

This morning our reading is from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, the chronology of the spread of the early church, starting with Jesus's ascension and pentecost. For the disciples, this time last year felt like this. The disciples were not relegated to the upper room. We don't have an exact chronology of how their journey went; but we know they spent approximately three years with Jesus during Jesus' public ministry. They were also spending time on street corners; perhaps they were out, going two by two to towns around the Sea of Galilee; perhaps they were resting on the great northern plain, listening to the most famous sermon ever given. Maybe they were in Nazareth, being given the cold shoulder. Wherever they were, there was no upper room. They were out: they were proud followers and disciples of Jesus; they thought this was the man who would restore the kingdom of Israel, rebuild the temple, and save the people from Roman oppression.

Jesus proudly rode into Jerusalem on a Donkey. He was targeted by leaders of his own people, and captured and turned over to Roman authorities after being identified by one of his own disciples. He told them all of this would happen, over and over again, in clearer and clearer terms; right up until they had their last supper together: right up until they were in that upper room.

Suddenly, it was not safe to be a disciple. The gospel accounts follow Peter as he runs after his Lord, who he first proclaimed as Messiah: there, by a campfire at a late night watch, he betrayed Jesus three times and disavowed him. Then, Peter finally understood when the cock crowed that Jesus had been right all along. I think that then Peter may have known what was coming next.

Defeat.

Death

Darkness.

Hopelessness.

The disciples, hiding in an upper room.

The women were the first to see Jesus. They went to the tomb, early in the morning. They see an angel, then Mary sees Jesus, but mistakes him for the gardener. Finally, they realize that he is risen. They run to the eleven, but they do not believe them. Jesus continues to appear, weaving in and out of the story. He is different: somehow he can be in different places, and walk through doors. His earthly body has been transfigured. Yet, he is still Jesus. Somehow, the Jesus they knew has been raised from the dead; yet the disciples still are hiding in an upper room.

Jesus walks right through the door of their upper room.

So then, after 40 days of teaching and explaining all that had happened, Jesus prepares to ascend to the father. Jesus has to ascend: it is the end of time on Earth, and the beginning of his heavenly glorification. For the disciples, everything has changed.

And yet... some things remain the same.

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6)

After all of the teaching, after the whole saga of Christ’s death and resurrection, after three years traveling with Jesus, the disciples still are stuck on the same old questions. When will you do the thing *we* want you to do? When are you gonna help *us*?

After Jesus ascends into heaven, ten days pass. We are on the third day of waiting. Can you feel it? The anticipation? The longing to be outside? The uncertainty?

Jesus promised the power of the Holy Spirit; two men in white robes, asked them why they stood around looking heavenward. So, “they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet,

which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying" (Acts 1:12-13a).

They went back to the same upstairs room. Remember: they are no longer alone: Jesus just walked through this locked door and appeared inside anyways! But that's okay. The disciples still went back to a place of comfort safety; they had to start somewhere, and that is where they chose to start.

What is it like to retreat to our upper room?

The past two months have been full of despairing news; hospitals overrun, thousands dead, hundreds of thousands sick. One in four people my age are now unemployed. It is dark, it is scary, and I do not know what is next. In a very real way, I have retreated to my upper room.

My upper room looks like a comfortable bed, where I can sleep for 9 hours a night— I've never slept that much before. My room also includes a television-- I watch TV for an hour or two a night; I've never watched TV this consistently before. My upper room looks like a lot of browsing the internet, and a lot less of the things I plan to do such as reading, writing, praying. My upper room is imperfect. However, it comes with the same feature as the disciples' upper room: it doesn't keep out Jesus.

For After Defeat and Death, Darkness and Hopelessness, Jesus broke through. Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to the women at the grave; he let Thomas touch the holes in his hands. He offered Peter forgiveness three times and empowered him to lead the church. He promised us the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is here. Jesus is here. God is here with us, even in the darkness and hopelessness of our times. Because after Jesus conquered death, he broke in. He broke into the upper room, our safe, but imperfect sense of security and worldliness, and he promised something more. When God promises, God delivers. After Jesus was swept away into heaven, the disciples finally understood. Then they did what we must do next.

They got together in their upper room, and they prayed.

I think that since the pandemic began, I have been praying a lot more. Not only am I more consistent in Morning Prayer, but I've been praying more in the in-between moments; after reading particularly challenging news articles, before writing sermons that seem to get harder and harder. In a world where the best thing I can do is stay home, where I can't go to my neighbors and hug them and comfort them and talk to them, I have to pray for them and call them on the phone. Surely there is no substitute for gathering in person, yet in this time, when it

is not safe to do so, we must persevere in our prayers. We are afraid. We have all, in some way, retreated to our upper rooms. We must be like the disciples, and pray.

Peter has a line this morning that is inspirational: “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” In the gospel today, Jesus too, intercedes on our behalf, asking God to care for us and unite us together, just as Jesus is united with the father. When we are set back from our optimistic expectations of the future and retreat to our upper room; Jesus will meet us there.

*Amen.*