

Acts 1:12-26

Our reading from Acts Chapter 1 happens immediately after the ascension of our Lord, which the Church remembered on Thursday, forty days after the resurrection. Jesus is lifted up, hidden by a cloud, and ascends to heaven. Where? No place we can travel to, not with a space ship or a time machine. No, this place is outside space, outside time. At the ascension, the Risen Lord takes his throne in heaven once more to exercise full power and presence with all his people of all times and places. What power! What amazing super-cosmic glory is taken up by the Son of God!

Meanwhile... the disciples are staring up into some clouds. And then they trudge dusty roads back from the Mount of Olives to the upper room.

Now what?

And we get our text for today: an answer to the “now what?” The answer? Be the Church, fulfill the Great Commission that the Lord left them to do. Go. Baptize. Teach.

How to do that? Send out the eyewitnesses. But first they have to figure out who the official representatives will be – they must fulfill the Offices of the Church. And so today, after the ascension the “now what?” is to fulfill the scriptures and set right the company of the apostles.

But to address that is to address Judas Iscariot. A sad story. What can we say of this man? First, is that he was, properly, in the Office of Disciple. Peter admits as much when he quotes, “Let another take his office.” And as a disciple he had the same calling, the same lessons, the same teacher as all the rest. When Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount did he tell Judas to shut his ears? Did he want Judas to betray him?

And we have stumbled upon a very important distinction. It is, no doubt, prophesied that someone would betray Jesus. But we must note the difference between God's foreknowledge and fatalism. Foreknowledge means you know what is going to happen, fatalism means you make it happen. And there is a difference! God, who knows all things, certainly knew Judas would betray Jesus. But did God make him?

Let's look at the text. Verses 24 and 25: "And they prayed and said, 'You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which *Judas turned aside* to go to his own place.'" Who turned aside? Judas did. It wasn't passive, he wasn't "turned aside by God." He turned aside, on his own, to go to his own place. A place with a bit more silver in it, and a bit less Jesus. And friends, that is no place we want to be. And it is no place the Lord wants or makes us to go.

That is a place of regret with no absolution, despair with no hope, death with no life. And so, every middle school boy's favorite reading, we hear, grotesquely, of the Field of Blood (and guts) where Judas hangs himself.

Which brings up another topic we cannot ignore: suicide. The long-standing trope is that if you commit suicide the Church condemns you to hell. But that isn't true. Let's be clear, suicide is a sin, certainly. It breaks the fifth commandment: thou shall not murder. Murder is taking a life when it is not yours to take and, as autonomous as we claim to be, no, your life is not yours to take. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God with your body." Your life is not your's to take, blood has been shed for it. So suicide is a sin, yes, an act of despair, yes, but the question when anyone dies is not, "was their last act a sin – suicide or speeding on the highway?", but "are they in Christ?" So

the Christian who struggles with clinical depression, how are they different from the Christian struggling with cancer? Or as Luther compares: how is the Christian overcome one night by the weight of the devil's attacks of loneliness, pain, guilt, and depression any different than the Christian overcome one night by a band of thieves? Christ's blood covers all his people's sins, even their last ones. There is great hope even in the midst of this darkness for God's people in Christ through faith and baptism.

The question I suppose to ponder in our reading today then is: was Judas in Christ? Having betrayed him... that is a scary road to walk. Was Peter in Christ after denying Jesus three times? That's a dangerous road to walk too. But Peter hangs on and Christ comes to him anew, with forgiving grace. Judas instead went to pharisees and a noose. Scary roads to walk.

Let them be warnings for us. Let us give no foothold to deceit and sin. Judas was taking a bit of money out of the plate? "Who's that hurting?" But soon his greed costs his Teacher his life, and he his own. So as we ponder the sad story of Judas, let us think: "Now what?" And the answer is be vigilant. Let us repent, let us seek help, and let us seek help in the Risen and Ascended mighty Savior, Jesus. When you have doubts and fears and depression go to Jesus and His promises in the Word of God for strength.

But what about the rest of the disciples? The "Now what?" For the disciples was as the psalmist said, "Let another take his office." Another disciple, another apostle must come forward. We often remember how they cast lots for them, they rolled the dice! And at the Seminaries we joke about throwing darts at a board to decide your first Call, but please notice they don't take just anyone off the street. There are requirements to fulfill this Office in the Church. The candidates must have been following Jesus from His Baptism to His resurrection - that is his entire ministry!

Is anyone these days fulfilling these requirements? Any more eyewitnesses? So no, there are no more apostles.

But we have their testimony here in the scriptures so we can be of good courage. The lots fall to Matthias and the ministry, as we see next week on Pentecost, begins. Now what? That's what! The offices are filled the Word goes out.

That trend continues today in the Church. Not with the Office of Apostle or Prophet (Capital P), but in the office of the Holy Ministry. Pastors are raised up to be servants of, primarily the Word, but also, secondarily, mercy. Other offices: teacher, deacon and deaconess (primarily servants of mercy) still abound for the building up of God's people and for sharing the love and word of God. And so the "Now what?" of the Church is essentially the same. What are we to do now that Jesus is ascended on high and works his gifts and power from the heavenly throne? Fulfill the offices of the Church, fulfill the Great Commission.

The question then is, which candidates are willing to serve and in what office? Anyone here willing to be brave and be a servant of the word for the sake of the Gospel and God's people? Anyone willing to visit for the sake of the Gospel and God's people? Anyone willing to lead, or teach, or organize, or be a peacemaker, or send cards, or talk to that neighbor, or balance a budget, or raise up a family for the sake of the Gospel and God's people?

We all have callings, we all have vocations where we can serve. The Church has a few formal Offices that need to be filled sure, but not all are qualified, not all are willing, that's OK. There are many parts to the body of Christ. But we all have callings. We are all parents, or children, or teachers, or employers, or friends, or neighbors, or fellow church members. The question you

have to ask is: “Now what?” And the answer is: however you may best serve the Gospel and the people of God in the Office or vocation you are in.

But as we go down that sometimes messy and difficult path of ministry, don’t forget the deep topics we addressed today. The devil works harder on us, those who work for the Gospel. So guard yourselves and never lose sight of the One who gave us this commission, the One who has brought us into this Church. Run to him with your fears, with your failures. Run to him with your frustrations. When the finances are red. When the people are frustrating. When the reaction to your work is nothing but rejection. When the children are stubborn. When our hearts dark. When the sins victorious. Don’t turn to your own way and place. Go to the place where Jesus, ascended to Heaven, still promises to be: Here where two or more are gathered; in his body and blood. Go to where the Spirit of God is: in your baptism and in the Word. Go back to the cross and tomb and find the King who fights for you, who washes you clean, who will make all things new. And having sat at his feet, you may find yourself ready to ask once more, “Now what?” And go and serve.