

Seventh Sunday of Easter • May 24, 2020<sup>i</sup>

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Acts 1:12-16 (John 17:1-11)

“Next”

This is the time in-between. As our nation observes Memorial Day this long weekend, remembering those who gave their lives in the service of our country's armed forces, it's probably not going to feel like it usually does. It's the unofficial start of summer, but you might not yet be able to do the things that you'd like to be doing this time of year. Here in Fairfax County, public parks are just now reopening. Swing by a favorite restaurant – carryout or curbside – and pick up a picnic meal to enjoy. Distantly socialize with your neighbors and friends. That's sort of where we're at these days. We, along with our neighbors and many businesses and services, are only just now transitioning. We're moving out from the stay-at-home living that has helped to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which has reshaped the world these past few months. Even so, we're not *there* yet. Are you feeling confused about what to do next? Reluctant to simply charge on out and see what happens? That's understandable. Right now, people have several differing thoughts as to how we as a nation (and world) should move forward.

This is the time in-between. Here at St. John's, we've started up a reopening team. They're looking into our options for how we might get onsite services and activities up and running. There's a lot to consider as we're looking to reopen our campus. Things aren't going to look exactly the way they did pre-pandemic. You might need to reserve a time for worship on Sunday, sort of like we've been doing with Communion appointments these past many weeks. We'll need to have seating spaced out across all our pews, then clean everything down after services. Out of care for your fellow worshippers, you're probably going to need to wear a mask for a while. And we're working to get a quality livestreaming solution in place in the sanctuary to make sure that we don't neglect anyone who might not yet be ready to come onsite for worship. The reopening team and our congregational leadership will be working through many factors such as these in the weeks ahead. We're planning for how to move forward.

This is the time in-between. Beyond what I've already mentioned, we're also looking ahead to a pastoral transition. I'm working with the leadership and staff of our congregation here to do what I can to ready St. John's for future work in the Gospel in this changed landscape. We've got a great team here, and I want to ensure that they're good to go for when I go. And my family and I are getting ready to head out to Illinois. There's all that other stuff that you've probably gone through if you've ever had a cross-country move. We're getting a house there. We're lining up movers. We're scheduling all those tasks that need to be checked off our list. I've found that a pandemic doesn't reduce what you need to do! But amid all that, we're hoping that we'll get to spend some time here with our family in faith at St. John's. Even though it's feeling a bit like we're both here and there, I know that you don't stay in-between forever.

This is the time in-between. It certainly was for Jesus' apostles as we heard in our reading today from Acts 1. On a Thursday almost two thousand years ago, forty days after Easter, the risen Jesus was lifted into the heavens, returning into the glory of God that was his from before the beginning of time. Jesus had given his followers the great commission, sending them out to shape more disciples, to share the good news of God's love through him with the world – so what's next? What happened next after this group returned to Jerusalem with great rejoicing (Luke 24:53)? They gathered for prayer. They sought out our Lord's will for how they should continue in the mission he'd given them. The Twelve had become the Eleven. To move ahead in the work that wait for them, they needed a replacement for Judas to take the share of the ministry which he had been given. They witnessed Jesus' ascension, heard his promise that the Holy Spirit would come upon them. So they got to it. The apostles weren't wasting the time they'd been given. They were making plans for how to move forward.

This is the time in-between. We're at this unique point in the church year right between the Ascension and Pentecost, fifty days after Easter, when the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and sent them out to proclaim the gospel in power. We're still in the season of Easter. We're still celebrating Jesus' victory over death and the brokenness of our world. (And for Christians, every Sunday is a little Easter!) But we're also looking ahead. We're getting ready to celebrate Pentecost – the birthday, of sorts, for Christ's Church – as remembering the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who brings us together and keeps us connected, even when we are apart. But as was the case with the apostles, we're not wasting the time that we've been given. We're moving ahead to what's next.

This is the time in-between. As Christians, we live in what we Lutherans think of as a now/not yet. Just as every Sunday is a little Easter, every day of your life in Christ remembers the resurrection that you've got in him. You have eternal life through our risen Lord **right now**, even as you can still look ahead to your resurrection when sin, disease, and death will be forever removed from God's renewed Creation. In a very real sense, we are in the last days: they began with Jesus' ascension into heaven. They'll end when he returns. But in this now/not yet time in between, your risen Lord hasn't abandoned you. Take another look at his prayer in today's Gospel reading. Jesus asks that his Father keep you in his name, that we may be one. Jesus was looking ahead for you because he knew what would happen next. He allowed himself to be betrayed, condemned, and crucified so that you and I might be forgiven. Our sin, our doubt, our fear, all taken into himself. Jesus gave himself so that we might have hope for every day of this life in-between.

Because of our Lord's resurrection, because of his ascension into heaven, disciples like you and I may have the same confidence as Peter and the apostles. We know that we won't be in a time in-between forever. Something better is coming. And God is with us, every step of the way – not because of our faithfulness, but because of His. He cares for you. As you look ahead, look also to how you might use the freedom you have in Christ to care for those around you. Plan to move forward in showing his love and care for them, too.

This is the time in-between. So what's next? Follow Jesus with Peter and the apostles, and know that you can have confidence in him, whatever the future brings.

**Amen.**

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<sup>i</sup> Passage for memory:

*And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. – 1 Peter 5:10*