

Where and How Do We Go from Here, Part I
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
May 16, 2021 Seventh and Last Sunday of Easter, Ascension Sunday
2 Kings 2:9-15; Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11

Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Seventh and Last Sunday of Easter and Ascension Sunday.

Where and how do we go from here? That was what the followers of Jesus must have been thinking as they stood with their mouths agape staring up into the sky after Jesus ascended into heaven.

Today we are not taking that story as literal truth. We are not taking it even as myth. We are looking at it for practical spiritual insights, because where those disciples were then, we are now.

Jesus was leaving and things would never be the same. They were on their own, having to find a new path.

Like them, we face a changed world. The pandemic has altered our individual lives and our church in ways that we have just begun to understand, and it is only one of countless ways that the earth's ecological crisis has ended the world we knew.

Where and how can we go from here?

Easter season celebrates the triumph of light and life over darkness and death, proclaiming a love powerful enough to overcome fear, greed and hate. Easter reveals the sacred way that brought the universe into being and is still birthing, evolving and renewing galaxies, and us, and everything around us.

Easter began with the disciples seeing that sacred way in Jesus. Now he was gone, but they had seen God make a way where there was no way. They were still full of Easter joy. Ascension Sunday tells us to have that same joy. We know that the Way of Christ is still here. We find it in stillness, in nature, in our souls. It is with us in our first breath and beyond our last. Let us worship together in peace and love and joy.

[the sermon begins below]

Where and How Do We Go from Here? Part I

Last March our familiar ways were taken away from us. We were forced to find a new way to be church literally overnight. We made the decision on a Friday evening to stop holding worship in the sanctuary and on Saturday had to announce the new path we would be starting on Sunday.

The path did not work for everyone. Some could not and others chose not to participate in our internet offerings. But the path brought unexpected gifts. Some were able to be with us who would have been excluded if we were still in the sanctuary. We entered one another's homes, met our pets, showed off stuffies and found a spiritual connection in our shared love of nature and family and the little joys of life.

We all listened and we all spoke as we suffered and grieved together over what was happening in our world. Our sharing of joys and concerns went far beyond what we had ever done before, and it was transformative. Many of us felt that it got us through.

Now once again we are on the brink of a major change. Soon some of us will return to the sanctuary, but we will not return to life as it was.

The day we officially step back into the church we will step into a new stretch of wilderness that no one has seen before. We have no map, but we know there will be challenges ahead.

The toll of the pandemic is not over, and ecological degradation continues to worsen, and racial injustices are being perpetrated, and white supremacist Christian nationalists are undermining democracy.

Meanwhile, spiritual communities like ours all over America are shrinking, even as we face an escalating spiritual crisis.

How can we serve the spiritual and practical needs of our community if the vast majority will never come through our doors? How can we help the Spirit speed human evolution toward oneness and new ways of living that can save the life that the Spirit created?

In the past year we have changed the way we gather and what we do together and the way we worship. We have changed the way we use the internet, we have organized ourselves to reach out to the community in new ways. Will we continue these new ways when we return to our old sanctuary? Or will we need to evolve still newer ways to meet the unfolding crisis of our time?

Where and how do we go from here?

Today's scripture passages share spiritual wisdom our ancestors found in moments when their world had turned upside down, when suddenly they had to find a new way.

The prophet Elijah heard God calling him to cross the River Jordan to meet his death. His protégé, Elisha, accompanied him, but at every town along the road Elijah urged Elisha to let him go on alone. Elisha refused to leave his side. He was faithful to his beloved teacher until the end.

The story reminds us to persevere on the hard path into the unknown, and stay faithful to one another.

Elijah asks Elisha what he wants, and he requests a double share of Elijah's spirit. In Biblical times a double portion of inheritance went to the heir who would assume the leadership of the family.

Elisha was younger and less experienced, but he asked for powers equal to his tasks. We may be a diminished church, but our work has not diminished. Our task is as great as any in history. We need to seek the power that the saints before us have wielded as instruments of the Spirit. We need to trust that the wisdom and strength we need will come.

We could easily be embarrassed and turned off by the Ascension story, but we can find useful wisdom in both the Luke and Acts versions.

Both are clear about where the path starts. It starts in our home—our home sanctuary, our home town.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers used to say, "Go into your cell and it will teach you everything."

A recent issue of *Northern Woodlands* magazine wrote about how to survive in the wilderness when we get lost. Many people start racing around in panic, but the thing to do is be still, gather our wits, open to wisdom and inspiration. Be at home in yourself to welcome the Spirit when it comes, and it will teach you everything.

The followers of Jesus went home and sang and prayed together. It helps to immerse in places or music or words where people have found the Spirit before.

The Ascension story warns about looking in the wrong places. In Acts, two angels appear and ask the disciples, 'what are you doing staring up at the sky?' The place we need to look is

down here, not up there. Jesus said that the realm of God is within and among us. We will find our path here.

The Ascension story reassures us that we can count on the Spirit's help to find our way because the Spirit needs us. We have a job as witnesses and instruments doing the kinds of things Jesus did—healing, bringing in those who are excluded, working for oneness, justice and peace.

We do not have a map, but the Ascension story shows that we do have ways to know the path when we see it. Love and joy are our onboard navigating system, designed by the Spirit to help us discern our way.

Viktor Frankl discovered this in the wilderness of a Nazi death camp. One day when he was ready to give up, the image of his wife flooded him with love. It became the why and how of his survival. He also found momentary glimpses of beauty that brought transcendent joy—a sunset, a light in a distant farmhouse—liberating him from the torture and confinement of the camp, reminding him where his love and joy were leading.

What we love and what brings us joy will help us know what kind of church we are called to become. The love that lays its life down for others and the fullness of joy that can exist in the fullness of sorrow—these kinds of love and joy attune our eyes and ears to the faintest signs of the Spirit's trail through the wilderness.

How and when will we regather? How can we serve in this changed world? Where do we go from here?

Let us enter the sanctuary of our heart, let us be still and seek the Spirit, offering our lives, opening our minds, emptying so that the Spirit can fill us. Let us pray in a silence permeated with love and joy...

A Double Haiku by Mel Goertz:

I like to stop and look
at the leaves in the trees
tiny and light green.

I like to stop and hear
the red-winged blackbird singing
his heart beating.