

*“Be Strong: Even Though Jesus Has Ascended, He is with You”* Based on 1 Peter 4:12-5:11, Acts 1:1-14  
Delivered on Sunday, May 24, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

Here we are in the seventh and final Sunday of Easter, and as I said in my sermon on Easter Sunday seven weeks ago, our Easter celebrations have been filled with the feelings of Holy Saturday, meaning that period of isolation, of waiting, of uncertainty, waiting for the Resurrection.

This week on the church calendar is another time like this. This past Thursday marked 40 days since Easter. This is the church’s feast of the Ascension, the moment in which Jesus returns to God the Father. Here the disciples watch Jesus return to heaven, then wait 10 days for the Holy Spirit to come to them.

The Apostles must have felt alone, felt abandoned, and felt lost, yet again. Like the Israelites after God parted the Red Sea and led them out of Egypt, Jesus’ earliest followers demonstrated an unimaginably short attention span. A cute cartoon on the Internet, called it the “Ascension deficit disorder.” We saw how before the crucifixion, Jesus repeatedly told them he would die and rise again, but after he was killed on the Roman cross, they hid in fear. This one I get, it is hard to see your friend hanged in that way, then believe his predictions that He would come back. But then He did come back to be with them. So, you would think that at this point, at the time of the Ascension, you would trust what He says. Still they had questions.

Yet, we know that even after Jesus again explained how the Hebrew scriptures pointed to this, when Jesus is about to ascend to return to the Father, from where He came, the Apostles immediately return to a mindset of their earthly hopes. They ask, “Is this the time you will restore the Kingdom of Israel?” It seems they have already forgotten what Jesus has promised them and they just want things to just go back to the way they used to be, when Israel was independent of Rome and a Kingdom like all the others on earth.

This is our eleventh service online, our eleventh service with empty pews. But at no point in these eleven weeks have you stopped being the church. You are a people called out by God, and you have continued to do God’s work. I am thankful for that and excited to hear of the many phone calls being made, meals delivered, notes being sent in the mail, and projects being done for others.

The church is not a weekly meeting or an amazing historic building like ours. No, you are the church. I am happy to be here with Rick and Priscilla, but I miss seeing all of your smiling faces, and I miss hearing your beautiful voices in conversation, holding your warm hands in mine, and holding also your cold hands, and hugging you in full embrace. But while those are beautiful things, that I deeply miss and wish we had back, these are not things that make us the church – we remain a community without them. Our wonderful homebound members have never stopped praying with us, being a part of this church, welcoming deacons, eagerly awaiting our letters each week with the bulletin and sermon. Now, we are all homebound, and like them, we are still the church.

We are the Church when we follow the teachings of the apostles about Jesus, when we share a common life, by caring for each other on a deeper level, when we pray, and when we receive the visible signs of God’s grace. These are the marks of the church we saw a few weeks back, and none require a building for corporate worship.

I truly believe that churches are essential – it is why we have kept working all this time – but I assure you, Sunday meetings in our church building are not essential to the church. The church that Peter is writing to in the letter we read today, does not have a building. Sure, maybe they could congregate without fear of sickness spreading, but they suffered persecution for their beliefs and their practices. Rome didn't persecute the Christians for gathering in worship. They persecuted the Christians for their love of Jesus.

Notice that when Jesus receives the question about an earthly structured kingdom, He sidesteps it – it's not for you to know – and promises them the Holy Spirit, then assigns them their duty – to be His witnesses to the whole world, starting in their city, then in their country, then to the world. The Kingdom of God is not like earthly kingdoms that conquer, but a kingdom based on service and love for one another. This is the Kingdom for which Jesus suffered, submitting to the conquerors and their cross, defeating the powers of sin and death, by giving up His life, His blood, to fulfill our side of the covenant when we could not, for our forgiveness, for love.

And so, if we believe in Jesus, who is one with God, who shared in our humanity in this way, then we can trust in the promise of sharing in God's life – abundant and eternal. But this does not mean that by faith we will somehow be rich, always healthy, and in power over others. No, it means quite the opposite – that we will share in Christ's sufferings, except rather than dwelling on these trials and tribulations, we are empowered to rejoice and shout for joy, when the glory of Christ is revealed.

This is not a cause to go out and seek suffering, the world will bring plenty upon us. It is a calling to stand empowered to love Jesus in His humility and be humble like Him, looking for ways to serve rather than be served, ways to give rather than receive, ways to be more than a social club that meets once a week in a building, and ways to be a testimony to the glory of God, not our own.

If the world, even those who say they follow Christ, revile us, or persecute us for this belief, then we are blessed. We who are Christian should not consider our suffering – of any kind for Christ – a disgrace, but entrust ourselves to the Creator who became a part of creation in Jesus. Suffering is not a sign of us losing, but a mark of the Creator's love in our lives. Our work should be to alleviate the suffering of others before our own, to put the needs of others, as Christ did, ahead of our own. This is not easy to do, and we may suffer for it when we do, but if it is hard for us who believe and know God's love, how much harder is it for those who do not? So, we must let our lives glorify God, to demonstrate God's love to others, so that they might know God too.

As a church pastor, as someone trying to follow a specific calling that God put on my life, in the start of Chapter 5, Peter reminds me in this passage, that my job is to help you understand this, to tend to the flock that is in my charge – in person or online – as I can, not because I am forced to, or because I will profit from my work, but with an eagerness to reveal the glory of God in Jesus Christ. I must lead by example as best I can, and do what I can to guide you. This is why each week my goal is not to entertain you, but to give you an encounter with the good news, and help you see Christ in your life to know you are loved by God.

The truth is, I know that I try, and that I fail, then I try again, and I succeed. But Peter reminds us, that we must try our best, but remember God is in control. When trying to be true to the good news

of Jesus Christ and God's Kingdom, whatever we may think was a failure by our estimations, may well have borne great fruit for the Kingdom of God. Likewise, whatever success we think we have, may be much more limited than we imagined.

It is not our certainty of belief, our accomplishments, and our perfection that God seeks. These things, as Paul points out repeatedly in his letters, only lead to our own pride. No, Peter points out that God opposes the proud, desiring us to admit we might be wrong. Peter says to be clothed in humility in the way we deal with one another. This is love, and this humility is answered with God's amazing grace.

My friends, in these uncertain times, we may want everything back the way it was, and it is tempting to rush into whatever we are able to do, thinking we act in faith. But faith is not testing God to spare you from COVID or seeking suffering. Faith leads us to a sacrificial suffering that we make on behalf of others. As Peter says, cast your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. Jesus is with you to receive your anxiety and be with you. Even though we feel alone, abandoned, and lost, as the song says from Isaiah, our God goes before you always – Be not afraid. Come follow me, and Christ will give you rest. Follow Christ and be alert.

Like a roaring lion, your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Our adversary in the manner of a lion – which is an image also used for Christ – so something that tries to look like Christ may be prowling about, perhaps telling us that we deserve to get everything we want right now, but is what we want, our own desires, necessarily what is right for us? Usually not.

Peter says be disciplined, or sober minded, stand firm in the faith, meaning resist this prowling devil. In all the world, many are undergoing the same – or worse – suffering. But hold onto the hope we have in Jesus, the firstborn of the new creation. Jesus is the One who is both our God and our brother, who died and rose for us. So then, after we have suffered, when the time is right, the God of all grace, who has called you to be the church in Christ's eternal glory, will restore you, support you, strengthen you, and establish you, yes, even establish us as a gathered congregation again.

In the meantime, let us patiently continue to do the work of the church that is essential, and trust in the Lord, not our governments, to make known when the time is right. Again, it has been remarkable to see you reaching out to each other in love, being an active part of this service with your comments and reactions, joining in on the Zoom check-in with me every Wednesday, and doing things to serve your community. Thank you for being the church outside of the building.

Your session and I had been planning a “The-Church-Has-Left-the-Building” event in June to hold services outside of our building to reach out to people in the community. We have canceled because we left the building in March. But it has also been great to see people who have found this church again, found us as a church for them, or found church for the first time because we have gone online. There is no doubt that in these uncertain times, God is working for us in all of this.

This may feel like an uncomfortable time of waiting, but let God's strength rise, and know that the One who makes all things new has Ascended, and still, remains here with you, enduring your struggle with you by your side. He keeps every promise that He has made to you and all of us. We hope that we will meet in this building again soon, but be patient, as we seek the will of God. Be strong in the Lord, and trust in your God. Amen.