

Sermon: We're Used To It  
Text: Acts 1:6-11  
Date: May 28, 2017  
Context: WWPC  
Memorial Day Sunday (Pavilion)  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*So when they had come together, they asked him,  
"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"*

### Acts 1: 6

Let's suppose you've never read the Bible before. In case you find that impossible to imagine, I should tell you that this is increasingly true on this campus and on campuses all over the country.

Every year, more and more students arrive here, having never gone to church in their lives, not even once, and having never read the Bible for themselves, not even a single verse.

So this is a real thing.

Let's further suppose that you are a sort of typical 21<sup>st</sup> century thinker. Having graduated from college, and so having absorbed a post-enlightenment worldview, you are of the view that the only beliefs worth having are rooted in things we can see, in empirical truth, in laws, theories and claims that science can prove.

But lately you've heard so much about the Bible you figured you would dip your toe into its mysterious waters, just to see what all the fuss is about. So one night you crack open the hardback Bible left on your doorstep by the Gideons (bless their hearts), and you begin to read.

Given your post-enlightenment sensibilities, what you find is a collection of stories that strike you as little more than fables.

A snake that talks from the midst of a garden paradise. A shepherd who leads his people to freedom, thanks in large part to his wonder-working staff, a magic wand if you will, that first turns into a serpent and later helps Moses part the Red Sea.

A miracle worker who was born of a virgin, who walks on water and who rose from the grave after dying a violent death on a cross.

As a post-modern reader, these stories strike you as the kind of tales that are common to pre-industrial, pre-enlightenment cultures the world over. Especially ones that find themselves struggling under the constraints of empire and occupation. They do exactly for their original audience what they are supposed to do: give them hope in a time of exile, of cultural distress and political alienation.

We have one of those stories right here. Not only has Jesus come back from the dead after three days -- something not repeated by anyone, anywhere, before or since -- but in this scene he floats up into the air, disappearing from his followers forever.

Just where did he go, one wonders? Does he still inhabit a body that, apart from being resurrected, looks exactly like one of ours in all other respects?

I get how all this might sound to post-modern ears. I understand why thinking people sometimes don't take these stories seriously, and why so many members of the so-called intelligentsia write disparaging things about the people who believe them, as if we are all simpletons and dimwits.

I say this because I will freely confess I am one of these dimwits. I also happen to have a completely different take on these stories.

Yes, I do read them critically, and sometimes I have to wrestle hard to find meaning in them, to discern the ways their truth applies to our complex world and complex lives.

But I am happy to read these stories sympathetically, partly because I know that the Bible was never intended to be read in the way we read a science textbook, or a newspaper.

That is, we're not meant to read it as a source of factual information, per se, but as a source of inspiration and revelation, a source of truth about who we are and why we're here.

I am also happy to engage the Bible's stories, and in turn to be engaged by them, for a simpler reason: because of how real they are.

King David's son, Absalom, rebels against his father and is slain by one of David's own lieutenants. And there is David, the King of Israel, howling with grief for his fallen son, despite his son's rebellion, just like any father would do.

King Herod kills John the Baptist at the request of his scheming, illegitimate wife, which is just fine because Herod had sensed a threat in John anyway.

And so, like some religious fundamentalist fantastic, Herod beheads this fearless prophet. No more will John stir up the people's hopes by proclaiming that, in Jesus, the Messiah has come.

Pilot finds a way to put down the threat represented by this same Jesus. Has him nailed to a cross -- the main form of capital punishment at the time.

As for Jesus himself, he weeps when he hears the news of his friend Lazarus's death. And he sweats blood on the night he is betrayed and arrested.

In a book that is ultimately devoted to the revelation of the Gospels, of God's good news to and for the world, these are hard stories. But because of that, they have the ring of truth. They read like stories from today's papers.

And the people in them feel the same emotions we do when hard things happen to us.

A couple weeks ago we focused on the story of the two travelers walking toward Emmaus.

They are walking home from Jerusalem on Easter morning. They've heard reports that, if true, would surely leave them feeling amazed and astonished.

But they don't believe these reports. Because when the risen Christ himself meets them on the way, this is what the text says: "They stood still, looking sad. *We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel,*" they say to Jesus himself.

And, now, in today's text we hear a variation on this same theme. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" After all this time, traveling with Jesus, listening to their extraordinary teacher say extraordinary things, and make extraordinary claims, and then watching him back up these claims by doing extraordinary things, things no one has ever done before, still they're disappointed.

Even now, after he has defeated death itself, they still want more. Something other than what they've seen, something different than what they've borne witness to. Something beyond their current reality.

*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel? We had sort of hoped you were the one who would redeem Israel.*

In light of everything Jesus has done, everything disciples have seen, including this reality-bending post-resurrection appearance, it seems like such a small-minded question, as though they've learned nothing during their three-year apprenticeship as Jesus' hand-picked students.

But they ask it for a very good reason. As the John C. Holbert, Professor of Homiletics at Perkins School of Theology, notes:

“. . . the terrible fact [is] that with the death and resurrection of Jesus precisely nothing has changed; the Romans are still evident on every street corner of the land, and Israel remains that pathetic far-flung outpost of the Roman Empire and shows few signs of ever becoming anything else. Their king is another debauched member of the Herodian line of half-breeds, and the governor is a despotic and cruel tool of the overlord Rome” (From *A Long Look at Heaven?* quoted on patheos.com, May 23, 2014).

And for the disciples, things are about to get worse. Jesus is about to leave them. For good.

This may not seem like such a crisis to us because we know how the story turns out. We know that the church survives the loss of its founder. Maybe this is why Ascension Sunday has never really caught on as a church holiday.

But maybe there's another reason we don't see Jesus's departure as a crisis. Maybe the real reason is because we're used to it.

Maybe there was a time at church youth camp when somehow God's presence was so intense, you felt like Jesus himself was sitting right next to you around the camp fire. Or maybe in the breaking of the bread in worship, you feel the palpable presence of the holy, the sensation of the sacred is so close you can literally taste it, and it feels like Jesus is alive and present, and that feeling moves you and inspires you and gives you hope. If so, that's good. That's what it's supposed to do.

But then there are the other times when, let's be honest, nothing feels sacred, when you feel lost or alone or abandoned. Like this Jesus has vanished up in the clouds and left you bereft, feeling like an orphan who's left to fend for yourself.

That is, in effect, how I felt this past Friday morning. I woke up to the news that the citizens of Montana elected a man to Congress who violently assaulted a journalist the night before the election for asking him a simple question about his stance on health care--among the most pressing moral issues of our day. Within minutes of opening my eyes to a brand-new day I felt sadness.

Yes, I found it deeply troubling that the person Montanans elected is a man with obvious anger issues, who has no business representing anyone in the US House of Representatives. But I was more troubled that they elected an ideological extremist, a man whose beliefs about climate, about health care and education and women's rights and gay rights are all so outside of the mainstream they belong in a different century and a different country.

On this Memorial Day Sunday, a holiday when we remember the sacrifices of those brave service men and women who have defended this country on our behalf, who gave their lives defending freedoms we take for granted, I hope you'll permit me a word of personal privilege.

I wanted to say to the people of Montana that when the glaciers melt because of climate change and tourists stop coming to your state, when your mother who is on Medicaid loses her health insurance, and you yourself can no longer afford health insurance for your daughter because she was born with juvenile diabetes, a pre-existing condition, when your roads and your highways fall into disrepair and your bridges collapse out from underneath you, and your schools deteriorate into wastelands of ignorance, when journalists across the country stop being merely assaulted and start being arrested as enemies of the people--purveyors of false news--causing us to lose the capacity to hold our elected officials accountable, then remember who you voted for.

Because you brought this on yourselves.

But given that I have precisely two friends on FB from Montana (neither of whom would have voted for this man, I'm glad to say!), I figured a rant like that would not reach my intended audience, so I held back.

And then on Friday we read the news about a man in Portland who began verbally assaulting two women on a commuter train in Portland. One these women was wearing a hijab; the other was an African American. We further learned that this same man killed two other men when they tried to come to the women's defense, and that one of these men was an Army veteran and father of four.

It's hard not to feel helpless in the face of the forces that helped put such a dangerous and ill-equipped man in Congress, and that made this hateful man in Portland feel like it's now okay in America to attack innocent women who happen to be Muslim, or black, and then kill people who try to defend them.

But on this Memorial Day Sunday, I must remember that the Constitution does not guarantee that democracy will be easy. It only guarantees that I have a right to participate in it. That by what I do and by what don't do, I will help shape the country I live in, or at least my small part of it.

And on this Ascension Day Sunday I must also remember the corollary principle: the Bible does it guarantee that faith will be easy. What it does do is tell me stories about people of faith who believed despite the evidence until the evidence changed, even when that evidence was heartbreaking, and even when it took a long time for it to change.

Megan Red-Shirt Shaw is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, who was raised on the Pine Ridge Reservation. She was also her class speaker at the Commencement ceremony of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the first person of Lakota heritage ever to be awarded this honor.

She closed her speech by offering this phrase that her grandmother taught her. She said it first in Lakota, which I will not even try to do. But apparently this is how it translates into English: *I remember. I remember you. Please remember me.*

So today we remember. First, we remember that when Jesus took his leave, he did not in fact leave the disciples bereft, orphans who were alone in the world.

He promised them that the Holy Spirit would come and empower them to survive occupation, and equip and embolden them to continue implementing the reign of God, even in the heart of Empire.

And we remember that this gift, this power, is also given to us to continue this same work.

And, yes, let us also remember the veterans who have gone before us, so that when democracy gets hard, we might rise and continue to build a country worthy of their sacrifice.

But today let's also remember the mothers and grandmothers, the fathers and grandfathers, the pioneers and the trailblazers, the youth group organizers, and the Sunday school and Bible study teachers, our forebears in the faith who read and believed these stories, and so taught us what faith looks like not just with the extraordinary things they said, but by the extraordinary things they did.

We remember them so that when faith gets hard we might rise and continue working to realize the reign of God even in a time of exile and cultural distress.

*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*

*It's not for you to know, Jesus replies. But here's a clue: Even as I take my leave, I'm sending you the Holy Spirit to empower you.*

*Draw your own conclusions.*