

Acts 1:6-14

When the disciples had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." "For we too are his offspring."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Start Your Engines - May 24, 2020

Acts 1:6-14

One of the signs that we are emerging from quarantine is that NASCAR has resumed. I'm not a big racing fan, but for anyone who watches sports, it's nice to see something live instead of videos of a 2010 Eagles game or the 1993 World Series. Watching sports loses its luster when you know what the outcome is going to be!

Of course, the NASCAR races aren't quite the same. The drivers are running their courses in empty venues and their pit crews are wearing masks. This may be a model for how other professional sports are going to handle things for a long time going forward. But something's better than nothing at all.

Have you ever considered what it takes to get a driver out on the racecourse? It's not like he wakes up, backs his race car out of the driveway, and heads over to the speedway, in the same manner that we go, or used to go, to work. No, that driver is part, just a part, of a huge team of people who must work together to insure that everything is as good as possible for that driver to get into his or her car and race. There are millions of dollars invested in each car, the driver, and the driver's team.

Imagine the training the pit crews have to have. It always amazes me that the race car can be serviced and back on the road in 11 seconds — new tires and refueled. Most pit crew members are highly trained athletes who learned the mechanical side after they began work. Speed, skill, and strength is what they have. And they better have it since an experienced pit crew member can make over \$100,000! The driver is like the quarterback in football — he or she can be the best at what they do, but it means nothing unless the rest of the team also does their jobs as well.

For any professional sports team to work, from NASCAR to hockey, to baseball, everyone has been preparing for years. Sure, what we see seems so easy, so straightforward. Sometimes we can imagine ourselves out there shooting hoops or rolling the ball down the bowling lane. Making it look easy is in fact the mark of the professional. They know what to do so well, they hardly have to think about it.

That's the real measure of the professional — not just athletes, but people in all occupations. Professionals know their jobs so well, it's so second-nature, that they are ready for anything. They can adapt to new and unexpected situations. Most of all, when they are tired, when the going gets rough, true professionals overcome their doubts and difficulties to make it work. We hear stories all the time about health care professionals going and going and going — sometimes for 36 hour shifts to take care of their patients. You might have heard of the employees at a PPE factory who did not go home for 28 days, working nonstop to make masks and other items for health care workers. These are the true professionals. Their lives, their training, their skill, their desire have all been building toward the moment when they use every last bit of strength, imagination, and sweat to make it work.

That's why we admire the athletes who put everything into making that last play or scoring the last goal almost regardless of whether they win or lose. It's the effort we admire. Whether working in an

ICU or stocking a supermarket shelf, we know there are people making an extreme effort and taking extreme risks for our benefit. Duty called and they rose to the challenge.

Sometimes, of course, we need to be reminded of our duties. There is no one who, when faced with tough situations, didn't consider quitting. When you're tired, when you're worried, when you think you've tried every alternative, sometimes you just want to give up. And there are other times, when you need reminded that you indeed have the talent, strength, and imagination, to go out and make things happen. After all, that's what coaches and managers are for. At the heart of it all, coaches and managers motivate individuals and entire teams by helping them find the inner strength and confidence that comes with being a professional. What are halftime locker room talks about, anyway? They rally the team to remind them of their potential. Every coach has a different style, of course. But the point is that coaches and managers have the power to transform their players and empower them to move forward when they are on the verge of quitting.

"Men of Galilee why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" What a statement! What a question!

Our scripture today finds the disciples of Jesus witnessing the most incredible thing they will probably have ever seen in their lives: the ascension of Jesus concluding his earthly ministry. And standing right beside them are "two men in white robes." Who are these guys? Angels in disguise? Secret admirers of Jesus? Doesn't matter. They were looking at the disciples craning their necks to get a last glimpse of Jesus, some of them no doubt with their mouths hanging open. The white robed men didn't wave goodbye. In fact, they weren't surprised at all. So what they did say to the astonished disciples is perhaps more amazing. They just said, "why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

In other words, folks, the show is over. Time to get to work. Time to start your engines.

Friends, it is very easy to regard church in the same way the disciples were doing: a show, a gathering, a time to see unusual sights. It is very easy to regard this hour online as "The Collingswood Show" and watch this hour in the same way we would look at a Netflix program or perhaps a game of Jeopardy!. We tune in, we watch, we might sing and pray along, and then after the program we might linger a bit and exchange notes with each other. Then, we're logged out of Zoom and onto the next thing. Repeat once a week.

But if that is all we're doing, then we are missing the point of this hour together. If all the disciples did was to look up into the sky, watching Jesus disappear as a little dot, they missed the point of the three years they spent with him. Watching church on line, or as we used to do and will again, watch in person, completely misses the point if all we are doing is watching. Because church is not a spectator sport. Following Jesus is not a spectator sport. Claiming that we are Christians is not a spectator sport.

As the disciples were for three years, as we have been doing for many, many years, we have all been preparing for the moment when Jesus of Nazareth steps out of the day-to-day earthly picture and instead hands it over to us.

Yes, us. We are disciples of Jesus, no less than the twelve apostles and dozens of others who followed Jesus around Israel during his earthly ministry. I'll repeat. We who are watching and participating in this service of worship are as much disciples as they were back then and the whole point of this church stuff is not to watch a nice show, but to prepare ourselves for building the realm of God on earth. Why did Jesus work so closely with the 12? To have a good time? To embark on a tour of Israel? To get people excited by teaching and healing only to walk away from them? No!

Jesus' earthly ministry was to offer his followers an example of what it means to embrace the will of God and live life as God intended it to be. In the Bible, we have the Old Testament and the New Testament. The point of the Old Testament was to show us that through a certain group of people called Israel, human beings could, could, could get along with each other, could help each other, and could respect each other in accordance with God's Laws and guidelines. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were raised up to teach the world what human life could be like: a life very different from the way most people experienced it.

Jesus came to live that life, live God's plan, show us truly that we don't have to tear others down for the sake of building ourselves up. We don't have to lie, cheat, and steal to get ahead. We can treat every person, rich or poor, slave or free, male or female, sick or well, with genuine respect and dignity. There does not have to be any hierarchy. We can indeed be equal.

That, friends, that is the fundamental message and purpose of the church: we exist to proclaim a different way of life and living, a way not seen by most people. We are here to model an example, and that example is Jesus Christ.

How well do we do our jobs? How well do we, the church, demonstrate that we are truly disciples of Jesus and not the followers of certain highly misguided leaders and every trend that comes along? Only you can answer that question, both for yourselves personally as well as for this gathering called Collingswood Presbyterian Church. But remember, this hour together is all about preparing us to witness, to witness by what we say and most importantly what we do that Jesus Christ makes a difference in our lives and that difference is so wonderful, so special, so important, that we cannot keep that good news to ourselves, but rather, we are here to share it with the whole world.

That sharing, that doing, that being is what Jesus was preparing his disciples for. Now the day of truth had arrived for them. They watched Jesus depart, what were they going to do?

The disciples had a choice right then, just like we have a choice. The show is over, what now? Would the disciples do what we do after watching fireworks? Fold up our chairs, walk to our cars, and drive home — entertained, but not really moved. Will we, when we press the "Leave Meeting" button on our screens, say to ourselves, "Hmm, that was nice" and just get on with preparing lunch?

If so, then all the time Jesus had spent with his disciples was a total waste of time. If so, this hour and all the other hours we have spent in worship, Sunday after Sunday, have been a total waste of time.

Everything we do, every prayer, every bible study, every song, every time we receive the bread and the cup is supposed to lead us forward.

So what did the disciples do? Was it a matter of “Show’s over, bye.”? No, they did not forget what they had just seen. They did not forget how they had spent the last three years. They did not just go back to their former lives.

What they did was to start their engines. When NASCAR drivers start the engines of their vehicles, all they know at that point was that they are about to set out on a journey. At that moment, anything is possible. At that moment they know that all the training, all the preparation, all the planning is complete. The time has come to act.

So the disciples acted. They came together and acted. How did they act? They acted the best way they could. The disciples began to pray. Yes, pray.

The disciples knew that in their three year journey with Jesus, they had seen, heard, and even done remarkable things. But Jesus did not leave them a blueprint or action plan regarding what to do next. So the disciples did the only thing they could do. They prayed. All they knew was that they were to tell the world about Jesus. Did they know how? A bit. Did they have the words to say? Some. Did they have faith that what they were doing truly reflected what Jesus wanted them to do? Yes, because that is why they prayed. You don’t pray unless you believe that someone is listening. And that someone was now Jesus. After the ascension of Jesus, the disciples prayed.

The question for us today is what are we going to do after this service of worship? Will we treat this like just another nice TV program and forget about it until next week? Or might we, can we, will we follow the example of disciples and start praying?

Friends, when the disciples went back to the upper room, the very room in which they had the last supper with Jesus, they all fit inside. How many were there? Maybe twenty or thirty at most.

How many people are watching this service online right now? Maybe twenty or thirty at most. Back then, the disciples prayed. They asked God what to do next. They opened their hearts, their minds, their spirits to their Lord and Savior and simply committed themselves to doing God’s will, wherever that might lead. They were starting their engines.

This day, this day. We have the opportunity to start our engines. There is no reason why, after we stop Zooming, to do exactly what the disciples did two thousand years ago. We can start to pray, pray, pray. We can pray to God and ask God how God wants to use us to spread the Good News of Jesus in this world. We can pray to God and ask God how God wants to use this Collingswood Presbyterian Church in our community and in our world. We can pray and ask God how God wants to take all our preparation, all our experiences, all our wisdom we have accumulated over the years and put it to work. Just like the NASCAR drivers last Wednesday, just like the disciples of old, we can start our engines. And when we have truly started our engines, watch out! Everything is possible.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.