

ASCENSION OF OUR LORD | MAY 21, 2023

ACTS 1:1-11 | PSALM 47 | GALATIANS 3:21-29¹ | LUKE 24:44-53

Today's reading from the book of Acts always reminds me of the famous final scene in *The Graduate*. (I realize I should say "spoiler alert" here, but this movie came out in 1967, so, you know, you've had time.) Ben Braddock has just interrupted the wedding of Katharine Ross, and the two of them have escaped and are sitting in the back seat of a bus. When they first sit down, they're laughing and smiling, but as the bus drives down the road, the laughter fades and they both get a look of dread in their eyes. They seem to be thinking to themselves, *Now what?*

It's almost certainly the same question the disciples found themselves asking. They've been sharing the good news together, joining in fellowship, and breaking bread with the risen Christ. But then one day, Jesus ascends into the heavens, and they're left just looking up at the sky. *Now what?*

And, Anderson, Lily, Ryan, and—maybe to a lesser extent—Valentina, it may be the question you find yourselves wondering today. *I'm being baptized. I'm being confirmed. Now what?* Well, let me give you three *Now Whats* that you have to look forward to.

First, now comes identity. Identity just means your sense of who you are. Identity is usually something that we form through story. We have stories that we tell ourselves about our family, our community, our friends, and these stories give us a sense of meaning about who we are. Some of these stories are great. They give us a sense of meaning, connect us with others, and make the world a more intelligible place to inhabit. But sometimes people use stories to hurt others, to erase marginalized groups of people, or to use you for their own purposes. We live from our identities.

Your baptism gives you a new and different identity to live from. In today's reading from Galatians, St. Paul says that being baptized is like "cloth[ing] yourselves" with Christ. You are stepping into his story. Which means that you are first and foremost, before anyone else says anything, before you think anything, before you even do anything, a child of God. You are loved and accepted and valued by something much greater than yourself and other people. It doesn't matter what anyone else says about you or what you say about yourself. The most important thing is what God says about you.

This is why we frequently remember our baptisms during worship. To remember your baptism doesn't mean that you remember who was here today or what the coffee at coffee hour tasted like or how cold the water was or how the pastor ruined the plot of *The Graduate* for you. It means remember that you are a child of God. Today and every day, no matter what anyone else has to say about it. God says that you are loved. And so no matter what other stories you hear and tell, you are always worthy of respect and dignity. That is the most important identity you'll ever have.

Second, now comes community. Since the early church, baptism has been the way that people joined the fellowship that we call Christ's church. Valentina, when you are baptized, you are becoming part of the body of Christ. And Anderson, James and Lily, when

¹ This is off lectionary so that we can get the baptismal imagery.

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you affirm your baptisms, you are not affirming that you were baptized ten or twelve years ago. (I could have told you that.) You are affirming that you intend to continue living in this communion.

This communion is Christ's gift to us. When Jesus ascends into the heavens, the disciples stare up at the sky waiting for some gift to come down. Some program, some curriculum, some binder. But Jesus doesn't leave behind an instruction manual or a special book. He doesn't create some 501(c)3. The gift that Jesus has given them is one another.² He creates a people who live in relationship with one another. Who follow Jesus together in good times and difficult times, who pray for each other and support each other, who do more together than they could ever dream of doing alone. As our bishop put it at synod assembly last week—I'm paraphrasing here—there is no such thing as an individual Christian. Only members of the body of Christ in relationship with one another.

This is why we always do baptisms at public liturgies. Where it isn't just your friends and family, but a bunch of people you don't know. It's why we have baptismal and confirmation sponsors who bring you to the font. And it's why this entire assembly will promise to pray for you and support you. And we have been praying for you. Because we are the body of Christ *together*.

And third, now comes purpose. When Jesus ascends into heaven, he could have said, "Don't touch anything until I get back." But Jesus does just the opposite. He says, "You will be my witnesses." As Jesus ascends, he entrusts his mission to us. To live as witnesses of God's great love. People whose lives communicate something about the way that God loves us unconditionally in Christ.

As today's rites put it, your purpose is "to proclaim the good news of God in Christ Jesus through word and deed, to serve all people following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth." That is your purpose. How you do that is up to you. There are an infinite number of ways that you can proclaim the gospel, serve the vulnerable, and work for peace. You will have to make your reverent best guess at how it is you can best live your vocations in the world. You will have to discern and pray and study and do all that hard theological thinking that we practice in confirmation class.

But remember that your purpose comes from God. It's not something that you can lose if you make the "wrong" choice. It's not something that someone else can take from you. It's not something that wears off after a certain number of years. It's sealed with the Holy Spirit, and it's not coming off. So as you go through life, remember that you might not always have a plan or direction or a sense of where things are going. But you always have a purpose. You are always an integral part of God's mission of redeeming and reconciling creation.

So, now what? Well, now quite a bit. Now identity. Now community. Now mission. Now we give thanks and praise to God as we bear God's redeeming word to all the world.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² Benjamin Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Faithlife Corporation, 2018).