

Sermon: Rise Up

Scripture: Acts 1:6-14, 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

Christian Ko Choi

May 24, 2020

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

In volume one of Luke's two-volume work, the Gospel of Luke, he tells the life story of Jesus from his birth to his ascension and all that Jesus has done and taught on earth. In the second volume, the Acts of Apostles, Luke retells about the risen, living Lord who continues to teach and acts through the Holy Spirit and witnesses. Hear the overlapping story of the two-volume work of Luke from Acts chapter 1, verses 6 through 14.

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> When Jesus had said this, as they were watching, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup> 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."

<sup>12</sup> Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. <sup>13</sup> 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 <sup>[a]</sup> James. <sup>14</sup> All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

The first letter of Peter is known to be one of beautifully written books of the New Testament, often described as the "Epistle of Courage, Pilgrimage, and Hope." Let us hear how apostle Peter brings hope and encourages the follower of Christ who are facing crisis in their own time through chapter 4, verses 12 through 14 and chapter 5, verses 6 through 11. Hear the Word of the Lord.

1 Peter 4:12-14

<sup>12</sup> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

1 Peter 5:6-11

<sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that God may exalt you in due time. <sup>7</sup> Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you. <sup>8</sup> Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist the devil, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. <sup>10</sup> And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to God's eternal glory in Christ, will Godself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. <sup>11</sup> To God be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Sermon: Rise Up

Text: 1 Peter 5:10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to God's eternal glory in Christ, will Godself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

Let us Pray.

Gracious God, we thank you for walking with us during the good times and challenging times. With your steadfast love and faithful presence in our lives, we call upon your name and turn to your Word. Risen Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

We have something in common with today's scripture readings; that suffering and death are roaming outside our doors. In Acts 1, after putting their livelihood on hold for 3-plus years to follow Jesus, disciples suddenly find themselves hiding in a room because Jesus died on a cross and after revealing resurrected-self to a chosen few, he ascended to heaven. They were afraid of the glares and watchful eyes of others at their direction for any of them who could identify them as a disciple of Christ which meant suffering and death.

Peter is writing to other believers during a time when Emperor Nero is persecuting Christians by capturing them and using them as human torches to light up the streets and his gardens. When Peter asks his beloved to not be surprised at the "fiery ordeal" that is taking place outside their doors, it is a literal interpretation of crisis Christians were facing.

Today, we too have a crisis in our hands in the form of COVID-19 which causes us to be afraid when we step outside our doors. We are using caution, following guidelines, and safe practices such as social distancing and frequent handwashing to fight against the invisible opponent that brings potential suffering and death.

As many of us have been accustomed to the new norm and are not as afraid of the virus by following shelter-in-place/stay-at-home order, I started to question the most often used command in the Bible: “do not be afraid.” Is this the end game what God and Jesus are trying to teach us in the moments of our lives when fear of death looms over all of us? That we just need to not be afraid since it is the most often used phrase? Today’s passage reminds us that most repeated phrase does not always mean the most important, and that we are called to be joyful.

As we have been in shelters and in safety for months and we have learned that not being afraid only does so much. All of us are looking forward to a day when we can be free to go about, run about, or even hug just about anyone we meet without worries. It is not enough to be safe and not afraid. It is unlikely that God who is perfect and beyond our comprehension gave us a partial recipe to live a fulfilled life here on earth. Then suddenly other commands of the Lord creeps into the picture in my mind. Give thanks; rejoice; praise the Lord; love one another; pray constantly; or be in peace (peace be with you). If we consider all the commands, no matter which circumstances we find ourselves to be in, we will find true happiness in life, simply in a word – *joy*.

We will find joy in our lives because we have let go of the greatest self-vice that is found in all human condition: control. As we learn to let go of control, we realize we do not have a need to have all the answers, and that opens a door for the Holy Spirit to enter our lives in an intricate way. This is possible only because of Jesus’ Ascension thousands of years ago, to address the deepest fear of the human condition: to be alone. Through the Holy Spirit, we will never be alone nor abandoned on earth or in death.

So friends, rather than focusing on the ordeal – a circumstance that is taking place in our currently lives – we are asked to remain steadfast in our faith and know that our Risen Lord will raise us up from our situations in due time: that God will restore, support, strengthen, and establish us. We need to rise up with the Lord to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Rather than being chained to our ordeals and fears, and being left powerless, we need to rely on the Holy Spirit and rise up from our self-imposed spiritual isolation and start praying and remembering our brothers and sisters who are undergoing the same kind of suffering.

Friends, let us together experience the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit among us, even in our separate, socially-distanced, and isolated times, trying desperately survive our current crisis by knowing that we are never alone. Let us rise to the occasion to share

the love of Christ with others in a spiritual way, leaning on our Advocate whom we received through the Ascension of Jesus Christ.

Amen.