

Acts 1:1-11, Ascension Sunday
Just when they thought they had it all figured it.
Farmville Baptist Church
5-16-2021
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It must have been 40 days like no other. I can hardly imagine it, and I'd bet that even as they lived it, the disciples could hardly imagine it either. When today's passage in Acts opens, it hasn't been quite six weeks since Jesus rose from the dead and began appearing to the women and the disciples, when they saw him with their own eyes and touched him with their own hands.

I imagine it had taken the disciples awhile to get used to the new, resurrected Jesus. It must have been disconcerting for Jesus to just appear among them unannounced and without warning. What would we ever think if that happened here among us?

By the time we get to today's story, were they finally getting used to Jesus showing up unexpectedly? On the road to Damascus, fixing breakfast on the beach? Did they think maybe they were starting to figure out this new reality? If they did, they shouldn't have. They should have known better by now.

Many of us know the larger story, but it always bears remembering. Before Jesus was born, Israel had been waiting and praying for hundreds of years for the Messiah. They were hoping for a king- who would free them from the oppression of Rome and restore the kingdom of Israel. And they were not alone. That seemed to be what the wise men were expecting when they showed up in Jerusalem looking for the new king. Maybe they thought they had it all figured out too. But they missed it, didn't they? Their new king, their Messiah wasn't in the royal nursery in the palace, no, he had been born in a stable in Bethlehem to parents who had journeyed from Galilee to the city of Joseph's birth to pay their taxes. Instead of being raised in royal luxury, Jesus and his parents were forced to flee for their lives, becoming political refugees in Egypt for a time before returning to their home and carpentry shop in Nazareth.

Jesus didn't begin his public ministry until his was 30. Over the course of the next three years, he preached and taught about the coming of the kingdom of God, he also healed the sick, raised the dead, and fed the multitudes. Once again, the people thought they had it all figured it out. This is the Messiah many said, the

one who will restore the kingdom of Israel and bring us liberation ó even though thatø never what Jesus promised or proclaimed.

Right up until his death, some still believed that Jesus wouldnø die, they were sure they had it all figured out. Except he did die that afternoon when the sky went dark and his followers scattered in fear, only to return to the upper room, hunkered down behind locked doors. While they were in hiding, yet another miracle occurred. Jesus rose from the dead.

Ah, I wonder if they finally thought they had it all figured out. What better candidate than one who has risen from the dead to be their literal king?? øThis is going to be great,ø I hear them thinking. So on that day, in Acts chapter one, when they gathered together, they asked Jesus, øIs this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?ø Is this the moment weøve all been waiting for? Have we finally arrived?

Of course, they didnø have it all figured out. The disciples were anticipating the kingdom of Israel restored in all its ancient power and glory but Jesus kept talking about the kingdom of God. What was ahead would not be the return of the days of Kings David and Solomon. Jesus would not fulfill their rapidly disappearing hope of driving out the Romans, Jesus would not overthrow the rich and powerful and Jesus would not put the disciples in those places instead. This was not a return to those glory days. Just when they thought they had it all figured outí ..

(PAUSE) Weøre far more like the disciples than we want to admit, arenø we? We so much want to believe that we have it all figured out, that we know exactly what God is going to do, and when and how thatø going to happen. Like the disciples, sometimes we really believe we know what God is up too, but like the disciples, sometimes we have our own agendas that we think should be Godø will, or at least we wish or hope that itø Godø plan. Itø a dangerous place to be, even when our agendas are good ones. Why?

First, when we have our own pre-conceived ideas of what is supposed to happen, itø hard to look at other possibilities isnø it? We can almost become obsessed with an idea we believe in it so much. This happened to a young minister recently that Iøve been working with. She has been very unhappy at her church for a number of legitimate reasons, and a few months ago a job opened up that she just knew was the right thing

for her. She was so convinced that she saw signs everywhere that confirmed that this would come to be. Except it didn't, and she was pretty devastated. It has taken her months to come to grips with the reality that this was not where she was supposed to be, that she didn't have it all figured out.. It's made her a bit gun shy about how to figure out next steps.

Another reason that this is a difficult place to be is that our visions, our ideas, are often way too narrow, they are often so much smaller than what God has in mind. I suspect that the disciples would have been perfectly content if Jesus had become king in Jerusalem. I can just picture them settling into cabinet posts and court positions and living out their days peacefully where it was familiar and comfortable. But God had a much bigger idea. We find it in Acts 1:8. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses - not only in Jerusalem but in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Now, there's a sweeping vision, there's a master plan! Just when they thought they had it all figured out, God was ready to disperse them to amazing adventures in places yet unknown.

I keep saying this, but it has been a really difficult 15 months. We've been holed up and isolated. The refrain we hear most often right now is, "I just want things to go back to normal." We talked about that in the church council meeting on Monday night - our desire to fully open the building, to have Sunday School and fellowship opportunities again, to work on getting folks back in worship and back to giving. What we so easily forget is that before the pandemic started, normal wasn't working all that well for us. Over the last twenty years we've been experiencing a slow but steady decline in membership, attendance and giving. Have things been familiar and comfortable, yes? Have things been effective and kingdom oriented -- if we're honest, not so much. Did you read the quote by Carey Nieuwhof in the bulletin this morning, "It's hard to move people forward if we're obsessed with getting them back." Instead of this being our goal, we have to open ourselves up to whatever it is that **God** has in store next. We may want to settle back into Jerusalem, but God likely wants to send us to Judea, Samaria, and well beyond.

On Friday, Mark Wingfield, editor at Baptist News Global, wrote a piece about the challenges all churches face as we prepare to reopen more fully.¹ In an article earlier in the week, he quoted veteran church

consultant Carol Childress. She suggested that among four indicators of churches that will navigate a post-pandemic world successfully is ðan infrastructure for community built on anything other than the traditional Sunday school model.ö Why?

Wingfield correctly notes that one of the things people have missed most during the pandemic is the connection we find in small groups ó our daily online devotions and our Wednesday night Bible studies have met that need for a number of us. But the reality is, post-pandemic, people will not be returning to the same activities we offered before. Again, why? There are multiple reasons for this, including (1) Weøve learned how great it is not to have to get fully dressed and out the door early on a Sunday morning; (2) Weøve developed new family habits that will be hard to break; (3) People who live far away have connected and reconnected with churches through online worship and small groups and likely will want to stay connected; (4) Some people will still be wary of virus transmission.

You may or may not be surprised to know that the most at-risk group for churches to lose right now is families with children and youth. Even before the pandemic, it was increasingly hard to get families to devote two hours a weekend to church ô meaning attending both worship and small groups like Sunday school. Lots of these families already were making choices to attend worship only or to attend a small group only, but not both.

After more than a year of not having to get kids dressed, fed and in the car to church, thereø's not going to be a huge pull to return to the previous stress of a Sunday morning. The pandemic has changed what people are willing to do with their time.

As much as we had to adapt in the early days of the pandemic shutdown, we have to do that much more now. Here are some questions Wingfield offers for consideration as we continue to adapt:

- **What matters?** Imagine we are designing church programming from scratch (because in a way we actually are). What are the essentials our church must do to fulfill its mission?
- **What doesn't matter?** If ever there were a time to kill off dead church programming, this is it. Can we muster the courage not to restart things that ought to have gone away even before the pandemic?

- **Who have we lost?** During the pandemic, some people have fallen away. What can we do to reach them again?
- **Who have we gained?** Many churches have gained new members during the pandemic — folks who never knew the way things were before. How are we going to assimilate them, including locals and those who have found us online?
- **What will people participate in?** Here's the bottom line, people are not going to come back to a church schedule out of obligation, they have little to no interest in saving our church. We must figure out what matters to people in the church instead of assuming everything will return to the old ways.
- **What will people lead?** Church ministries are only as good as our ability to recruit solid leaders for them. If we can't enlist leaders, there's a pretty good chance we won't draw attendees either. We have little data yet on how volunteerism in the church has been affected by the pandemic.
- **What can be shortened?** One of the myths pandemic worship has exploded is that a Sunday morning worship service must be at least a full hour in length. Turns out you can do a lot in 45 minutes. Tighter, more focused preaching and worship is needed now more than before.
- **What can continue to be done remotely?** We've learned the joy of not having to drive to the church or stay late after church for committee meetings. Wingfield sees little reason ever to have routine in-person church committee meetings in the future.
- **How might the post-pandemic church build relational community?** Pandemic-starved people are craving real community but they're not willing to waste their time on things that doesn't pay off. This reminds me of the wisdom of some landscape architects who intentionally don't build sidewalks into their projects at first but wait to see where people naturally beat down paths. Then they put sidewalks or trails in those places. Take a look at what our congregants did on their own during the pandemic to maintain community — and in the days immediately after being vaccinated — and encourage more of that.
- **What is the smartest way to provide essential discipleship training for children and youth?** Again, before the pandemic, traditional Sunday school for preschoolers, children and youth were experiencing

half-time attendance at best. It already was difficult to teach a complete scope and sequence of the key Bible stories when half the class was present one week and another half the next. No one know the answer to this question, but it's one we all need to figure out sooner rather than later.

- **How will you provide variety within your context?** Someone could listen to all the suggestions above and surmise that the answer moving forward is to strip down all church programming to the bare minimum and drive everyone into the same funnel. Wingfield predicts that would be disastrous, and I tend to agree. Even though we've been shut up at home for months, we've had options. We could attend any church or Bible study group we want online. We've had thousands of choices of what entertainment to watch on TV. We could have all manner of food delivered to our front doors. Folks are used to choices and will be unwilling to give that up. How do we streamline but offer variety?

Friends, we are at a moment of excitement but also vulnerability. We can't just expect to pick up the church calendar from early 2020 and assume it will work in this new world. Instead, we need to be preparing ourselves to be God's hands and feet in the world in whole new ways as the wind of the Spirit blows among us.

I What will become of Sunday school? Mark Wingfield, May 13, 2021, <https://baptistnews.com/>