

“Jesus Has Left the Building”
Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
May 3, 2020

Act 5 selected verses

¹²The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. They would come together regularly at Solomon’s Porch. ... More and more believers in the Lord, large numbers of both men and women, were added to the church. ...

We skip ahead fifteen verses during which the apostles were arrested and imprisoned overnight. The next morning, when the Council called for them though, they were found outside, teaching! When they were before the Council, the high priest confronted them. We continue...

²⁹ Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than humans! ³⁰The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹God has exalted Jesus to his right side as leader and savior so that he could enable Israel to change its heart and life and to find forgiveness for sins. ³²We are witnesses of such things, as is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” ...

³⁴One council member, a Pharisee and teacher of the Law named Gamaliel, well-respected by all the people, stood up and ordered that the men be taken outside for a few moments. ³⁵He said, “Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you intend to do to these people. ³⁶Some time ago, Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and some four hundred men joined him. After he was killed, all of his followers scattered, and nothing came of that. ³⁷Afterward, at the time of the census, Judas the Galilean appeared and got some people to follow him in a revolt. He was killed too, and all his followers scattered far and wide. ³⁸Here’s my recommendation in this case: Distance yourselves from these men. Let them go! If their plan or activity is of human origin, it will end in ruin. ³⁹If it originates with God, you won’t be able to stop them. Instead, you would actually find yourselves fighting God!”

The council was convinced by his reasoning. ⁴⁰After calling the apostles back, they had them beaten. They ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, then let them go. ⁴¹The apostles left the council rejoicing because they had been regarded as worthy to suffer disgrace for the sake of the name. ⁴²Every day they continued to teach and proclaim the good news that Jesus is the Christ, both in the temple and in houses.

After Elvis Presley finished a concert, his fans would continue to cheer, hoping he’d come back on stage for one more song. When finally the speaker announced, “Elvis has left the building,” they knew the concert was indeed over and it was time to leave.

When we first entered this time of pandemic, my messages were intended to inspire hope and courage. They reassured rather than challenged. Pandemic or not, it is always important for us to recognize God’s activity in the life of the world, to know that God did not set this disease on us, to accept that God grieves with us.

We have entered a different reality. We ask each other, “How are you holding up?” and answer, “The best we can, given the circumstances.” It is easy to forget when you are isolated at home that everyone – from children to centenarians – is trying to make sense of this strange, new world. Please, hold onto this truth: You are not alone. We are all in this together. And though we may

emerge from the experience bruised and shaken, we will come through it.

Today, I want to talk about that future, when we can leave our homes, when we can pray, sing and eat together, when we can volunteer at the shelter or do a mission trip.

You see, Jesus too has left the building, if he was ever in one to begin with. Jesus has left the building and we have a decision to make. Will we stay within, practicing a very limited form of Christianity? Or will we follow Jesus? This question is important because, rather than providing shelter and safety to all, the walls of church buildings are often seen as barriers that keep people out. People outside these walls find church buildings to be places of judgment and exclusion. So many church buildings have become monuments to the unwavering belief of the faithful but serve little other purpose.

Yet Jesus has left the building. Instead, we can find Christ everywhere, in everyone and everything. He is present at the gay bar, by the Red Box outside Walgreens, in the Asian market, at the shelter in the park and the food pantry. Christ is with Linda who has left the church because she can no longer accept the disparity between Christ and his followers. Christ's real presence, even after his execution, was the reason that his disciples continued to preach and teach. It is the context for today's scripture lesson.

Gamaliel was a renowned teacher. As any good teacher, he paid attention. And he noticed that God can and does move through people who are outside traditional religious structures. Gamaliel cautioned his fellow council members against acting against something that might well be God's handiwork. If the Jesus movement was of human origin, he said, it would fail, but if it was of God, they could not defeat it and would only end up looking foolish.

Jesus has left the building, and God calls the church to follow him. Sunday morning and Wednesday evening Christ-filled gatherings are wonderful. But Jesus does not stay put afterward, waiting for the next time. He is out there, with the confused woman who just wants to get home, yet home is where she came from. He's with the one who is so isolated in their apartment that they forget that so many others are in the same boat. Jesus is with the man who feels like the church turned its collective back on him. Jesus is with each of you. This is where the church needs to be, for both the good and the future of the church. This is where we need to be, for ourselves and for everyone else who has been unable to cross the threshold into the building.

Most people realize that distancing is necessary for now. My question is, what are we doing with this opportunity? For opportunity it is. Not to get into politics, but for decades our and some other nations have let another dis-ease take hold as we ignored needs for better medical and social infrastructure, as we turned a blind eye to injustice in favor of economics, as we pretended that the earth and its non-human inhabitants exist only to serve us and that this could continue indefinitely. Coronavirus made this dis-ease obvious to the point that it can no longer be ignored.

On a smaller scale, a person knows what they need to do to take care of their health. We understand about food, activity, stress. We accept that though we may try a quick fix, Band-Aids are generally not the answer. We have to look at the underlying causes for the symptoms. Then we work to eliminate them or at least lessen their impact.

As a church, as a world, even as individuals, this moment apart allows us to reevaluate – what really matters? what does not? Is our way of living making it harder for others simply to live? Is that the life God wants for us?

As I prepare to step away from pastoral ministry in June, I'm reading a book called *Transitions*. In it, the author writes of the absolute necessity to create a space between the old "what has been" and the new "something different." He posits that much of our unsettledness after a change comes from not having honored the need for this space. Victor Frankl similarly wrote about the moment of opportunity between what has happened and how we will respond. In the space between these two, we get to choose the way in which we will move forward.

Coronavirus is giving us a space in time to prepare for what could be a wonderful, justice- and mercy-filled, new normal. How far are we willing to follow Jesus?

Scott Carlson wrote about the time the Trustees installed automatic lights in the church bathrooms. One Wednesday evening, he watched a youngster take a step into the bathroom. He froze when the light did not come on. Scott could sense his fear, so he said, "Take another step or two, it will be okay. If you like, I can stand here at the door until the light comes on." The boy did want that, so Scott stood at the door as he took a couple more steps. The light came on. Scott could see the relief in the boy's eyes.

Stepping forward into unknown territory, even when we know we have to, is difficult. We are walking through the unknown. Though our rational mind tells us the light will eventually come on, it is hard to continue. We can take hope when we remember that through the ages many people have walked through such times. From the time of Abraham, to Daniel, to Peter and the other disciples, we have all faced the unknown. We grieve. We do our best under the circumstances, as we try to figure out how to live fully into God's intention, even now.

We are living in interesting times – maybe even exciting when we think of the possibilities God has in store for us. Our faith stories remind us that whatever we face, God faces with us. Wherever we go, Christ has gone before and is waiting for us. Keep faith. You are not alone.

Amen.