

Around this time last year, my wife and I decided to take our then three-year old twins to their first Orioles' game in Baltimore- my hometown.

Actually, it was completely my idea.

Like a little kid, I built up the day with so much excitement it made packing a bit difficult. Our kids wanted to leave and go to the baseball game NOW. They no longer wanted to talk about the giant baseball field, oversized mascot, and even the opportunity to be with their grandparents who were attending the game with us. *We knew we would need backup.*

Our kids wanted to be there *now*. Noah, my son, even sat by the front door, head in his hands, and kept repeating, "can we go now?"

The car ride was pretty uneventful. Then, about 80 minutes in, we heard the dreaded phrase that causes chills to roll down the spine of every parent when uttered, a phrase we had yet to hear until this day. A phrase we had hoped we could avoid just a little longer, because once it comes out in one car ride, it's bound to be spoken for every car ride thereafter. And more than likely to be spoken multiple times. Film makers have even made a terrible movie with this question as title. I am sure we can say it in unison: *Are we there yet?*

As soon as our son had spoken these words, Amber turned to me with half a smile and a hand plastered to her forehead, *it's started*, she said. *it's been spoken. Are we there yet?*

We come to today's Ascension story and encounter the disciples who had wondered if they had arrived. "Jesus, is this the time when you will restore your kingdom?" They had hoped, and many assumed, the answer was a resounding, "yes!" In fact, only a few weeks ago we read in the prequel to Acts, i.e. the Gospel of Luke, about those traveling the road to Emmaus. When they encountered, unbeknownst to them, the resurrected Christ, they declared a similar lament, "*we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.*"

They thought they had arrived- they were indeed finally there- at God's promised future, a future they had been taught for generations on end; a future when the poor would be elevated and receive their provision. The hungry would be fed. Blind would receive sight. The oppressed and marginalized would find their advocate. Justice would break into a world unfairly bent towards the rich, powerful, and privileged. Creation would begin to encounter restoration and healing as God began to right a world wronged by human negligence and sin.

In the life and stories of Jesus, all these things were breaking open right before their eyes. The kingdom of God was coming...or had come...so they thought...at least they hoped. The children of these early disciples quite possibly asked, *are we there yet?* “Yes!” their ancestors would reply. Only for the cross to lead to a, “Well, maybe not quite yet.”

Quick aside: We had finally arrived at the stadium. Well, sort of. I missed the exit and my kids could see the famous warehouse adjacent to the ballpark. They recognized the sign and symbol right in front of them. But we were *not* there. We were now stuck in traffic. So they kept pointing and staring and wondering why we were not stopping to get out of the van. You could hear the questions in their heads, or maybe they were my own since I wanted so desperately to get into the stadium. We were there. Yes. But not really. Disappointment, anxiety, and uncertainty about when, if ever, we would arrive started to settle into our hearts and minds.

Still lingering in resurrection joy, the disciples are sure to have been perplexed and disappointed when Jesus responds to their longing for answers with, “this is not for you to know.” They even miss the instructional words of the Messiah, three different occasions when Jesus gives them hope.

**You...will receive power. You...the Holy Spirit will fall upon. You...will be my witnesses.
You. Church. You. You are people of the Ascension.**

But they are distracted by their despair as Jesus ascends and is *taken from their sight*.

Are we the same?

Youth ministry guru and Princeton professor, Kenda Creasy Dean, says both the disciples in this story and the church two millenia later are suffering from what's called, *Ascension Deficit Disorder*.¹ In the midst of so much social, religious, racial, economic, political, and personal despair, our necks frequently become stiff from looking upward and pondering when- if ever- Jesus will *come again in the same way he was seen going up to heaven*. We wonder, *have we been left here on our own?* We then become so distracted by our despair that we are tempted to abandon any embrace of Christ's call to carry cross and live as resurrection and ascension people.

As I have wrestled with this text this past week and spent a lot of time scrolling through online newsfeeds, which have covered everything from the derailed Amtrak train 188 to devastation in Nepal, these questions have also been my questions. As I have settled into ministry within our presbytery and larger denomination, I have also wrestled with ascension deficit disorder and "are we there yet" questions in profoundly new ways. Actually, two distinct ways that frame much of what is going on in our midst as a larger church movement.

First, are we there yet? As in, is this the end? Are we dead as a particular expression of the Christian church?

The critics within and around the church are loud. Any and every misstep echoes not only in our congregations, but also on social media and newsfeeds for the world to see. When it comes to the next generation, bloggers and editorials assume our influence and relevance to the next generation is failing at best and nonexistent at worst. Those who get wind of church statistics directly connect smallness with presumed ineffectiveness and faithlessness. The way we manage internal conflict is scrutinized and underscored as reason the church dare not speak of reconciliation and unity when itself evokes division. Which leans many within and beyond the church to ask, as if our demise were imminent, are we (or, are they) dead yet?

I dare us all to say, "no." True, we are in deep need of continual reform and self-reflection. We must remain a confessional church in all sense of the word. Yet, while there may be parts of our language, practice, polity, governance, and tradition that have been or need to be laid to rest, new life is indeed emerging all around us- **if we have the eyes to see and ears to hear**. We, the church of Jesus Christ

¹https://www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/School_of_Christian_Vocation_and_Mission/Institute_for_Youth_Ministry/Princeton_Lecture

generally and the Presbyterian Churches in and around Philadelphia more specifically, have much to celebrate and anticipate as we recognize where and how the Holy Spirit has indeed come upon us and enabled us to be God's witnesses in and for the world God is in the process of saving and making new again. **We are not dead yet.**

In my mere three plus months as your Associate Presbyter in the oldest Presbytery where Presbyterianism began in this country, I have had the chance to learn stories of creativity and faithfulness that would challenge the cynics and contrarians among us.

There are churches in Southeast Philly collaborating with various multicultural congregations to disciple first-generation immigrants who also happen to be first-generation Christians. There are churches in Southwest Philly who partner with Northwest suburban churches on the mainline to practice the presence of Christ with urban youth and children. Small and large churches in the Northeast are empowering the next generation of leadership in thriving youth ministries- thriving defined as ministries of both 3 and 60 youth. There are churches who have launched new worshipping communities through the arts, implemented homework help programs for after-school youth, and those who continue to advocate against pervasive violence that continues to plague our neighborhoods and communities. I could go on...

I have not even mentioned how this congregation continues to model faith through your endless extension of hospitality to community programs, AA, and Presbytery gatherings. Your very presence in this mall is a testament of your commitment to "proclaim Jesus' love in word and deed...[as you] grow in discipleship and Glow with the love of God."

Church, we are not dead yet. But that leads to another question...

Are we there yet? Are we fully alive and complete? Have we arrived at the ultimate destination with a fulfilled mission in the world?

Again, the answer is "no." We live in between God's promised future and a world paradoxically beautiful and despairing. We live in the space where new life enters into this world every 4.2s and some of those same children are diagnosed with chronic diseases or live malnourished as their families live on less than two dollars a day. We plant beautiful vineyards and travel to places where creation

echoes the ancient and divine lyric, *it is good*. Yet we also learn of climate change and earthquakes that devastate whole countries like Nepal. We give thanks for ways we see communities form around and celebrate diversity, but also cannot ignore the increasing realities of war, violence in cities like Baltimore, and growing gaps between the rich and poor, rise in incarceration statistics, and the related lack of access to quality education for children in our own city of Philadelphia.

We are not there yet. We are not done yet. But we also must not be distracted by despair and ascension Deficit Disorder. We must remember the call of Christ:

You...will receive power. You...the Holy Spirit will fall upon. You...will be my witnesses. You. Church. You. You are to live in the present as a Resurrection and Ascension people.

We, the church, have much work to do, many boundaries to cross, and Jerusalems, Samarias, and ends of the earth to embody God's dreams for the world. Which means we need to be asking a whole lot of questions. Where is the church called to go next? What voices have we yet to include into our conversations? What risks have we failed to take, not trusting the Spirit's power as we follow Jesus in the world? What convictions do we hold white knuckled, preventing us from considering the possibility that God may be doing something new and good for the sake of others we have written off as not worthy of inclusion? What creative approaches to mission, worship, hospitality, and advocacy have we not created room to explore because we have been so distracted by despair or perceived limitations in ideas and resources? *These are the very questions that led the faithful to combine the efforts of local churches in this area and launch Church on the Mall, in a public space, nearly 50 years ago.*

You, Church on the Mall, are indeed an Ascension People.

I love what Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the 21st century, says:

"[Christians] do not merely live under the promise, which could be said of all men [and women]. They live in and with and by the promise. They seize it. They apprehend it. They conform themselves to it. And therefore in their present life they live as those who belong to the future."²

²*Church Dogmatics* IV.1, p. 120.

Friends, may we be those who conform ourselves to God's promised future in our present life and witness. May we not be distracted in despair and instead seize the moment God has given us to be the church in and for the world God loves.

Friends, we are not dead yet. We are also not there yet. So, what are we looking at? What are we waiting for? Where is God calling us to live on earth as it is in heaven? Be God's witnesses in your Jerusalem, Judeas, Samarias, classrooms, work places, shopping malls, and to the ends of the earth.

That's what it means to be a people of the Ascension.

Amen