

From the Pulpit: September 12, 2021

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Confirmation Commissioning

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Acts 1:1-11

The (Re)Birth of the Church, I: His Witnesses to the End of the Earth

Well as you can guess Katie, Christine, and I have spent these last 18 months thinking about what the church will look like when this pandemic is behind us, if it ever will be behind us. So we're teaching this sermon series about the (Re)Birth of the Church. The *re* is in parenthesis because Luke has given us a blueprint for what the birth of the church looked like in the Book of Acts. We'll think about what the rebirth of the church might look like going forward.

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

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

"We're still Kenilworth Union Church, but the community is a little different, a little more dispersed. We're still connected, but we're less gathered."

The last 18 months have been an unsettling time for all of us, in every arena of life, not least for parish pastors. One new minister said, "When I got ordained, I didn't realize I was signing up to be a Chaplain to the Apocalypse."

A Church Consultant said, "Your church is not returning to a new **normal**. It's returning to a new **reality**."¹ Right now across America, in-person worship attendance is 36% of what it was in 2019. Last Sunday at Kenilworth Union, there were 50 people at the 8:30 service and 40 people at the 10:00, which is just about 36% of what we had on Labor Day Sunday in 2019. But YouTube tells me that 126 people worshiped with us virtually last Sunday, so if you count the virtual worshipers, and I guess you should, our attendance was roughly the same as it was two years ago.

We're still Kenilworth Union Church, but the community is a little different, a little more dispersed. We're still **connected**, but we're less **gathered**. And it might be that way for a long time, maybe forever. Seventy-one percent of Baby Boomers want to return to in-person worship as soon as possible, but in the younger generations—Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z—only 42% want to return to in-person worship.² **Ever.**

¹ Thom Rainer, "Five Reasons Why 2021 Should Be a New Base Year for Your Church," a blog at churchanswers.com.

² Carey Nieuwhof, "Three Shocking Statistics That

The Barna Research Group predicts that one in five American congregations will not survive this trauma over the long haul. For churches like ours—mainline churches: Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians—traditional churches like ours, it’s one in three.³

So let’s think about what all that means, and to do that, we’ll go back to fundamentals. In December of 1960, the Green Bay Packers squandered a late fourth-quarter lead and lost the NFL Championship to the Philadelphia Eagles, so at the beginning of training camp in the summer of 1961, legendary Packers Coach Vince Lombardi held up a pigskin and said, “Gentleman, this is a football.” I still remember the high school football game when our star running back fumbled twice. At the next practice, my coach called him up to the front and duct-taped a football to his arm. He got his point across. So back to fundamentals: “Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the Church.” The Book of Acts.

The first thing to remember is that Acts is the second part of a two-volume work written by St. Luke who also wrote the Gospel of Luke, of course. Unhappily when the New Testament books were assembled and placed in their present order, somebody decided to slip the Gospel of John between Luke and Acts, partly disguising the bicameral nature of this one work (like the top shelf of this bookcase; maybe we should rearrange the volumes in our library to look like the second shelf—Mathew, Mark, John, Luke, Acts.)

It’s a good idea to remind ourselves now and then that the Gospel of **Luke** fades to black with the words “To Be Continued” on the screen, and the Book of **Acts** begins like a serial television show: “Previously, on *Ted Lasso...*” “Last week, on *The Walking Dead...*”

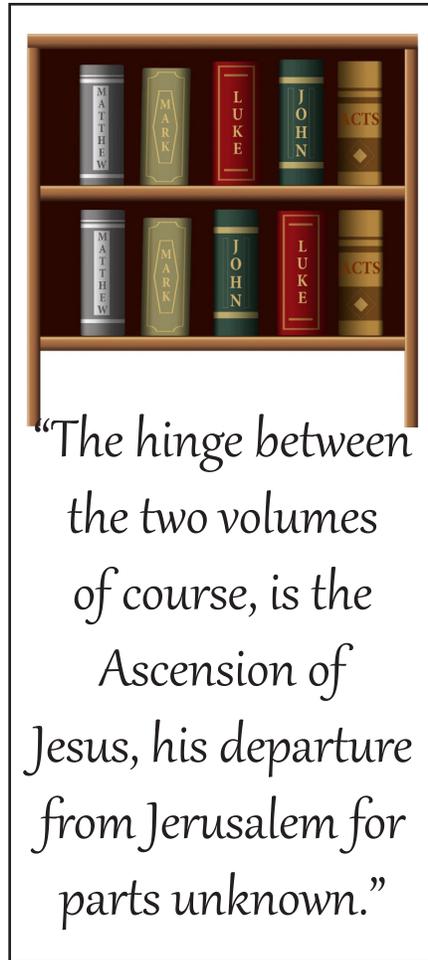
Luke-Acts starts in tiny Nazareth with a pregnant teenager and ends in Rome with Paul seeking an audience with Emperor Nero, a thousand points of light flickering on here and there across the entire map of the Roman Empire, supplanting the Roman pantheon with the one true God and enthroning the Christ where the Caesar once reigned supreme.

The hinge between the two volumes of course, is the Ascension of Jesus, his departure from Jerusalem for parts unknown. Ironically, the Church is **born** when its hero **leaves**. The Church **takes off** when Jesus **takes off**. There he is chatting amiably with his friends and then he rockets up into the wild blue yonder like Jeff Bezos.

Now don’t let the antiquity of this ancient story throw you off. The Ascension of Jesus is an eccentric little story from an obsolete three-tiered conception of the universe almost inaccessible any longer to twenty-first-century minds. Even the metaphor hinted at in that word “Ascension” is unworkable in a Copernican-Newtonian-Ein-

steinian universe where there is no ‘up’ or ‘down’ but only ‘away’ from the curved surface of the only habitable world we know.

Someone asks, “Where did Jesus go? How far and how fast? What did it look like? If Jesus were ascending at the speed of light, he’d just now be reaching the edge of the Milky Way.” This little observation has not been fact-checked.⁴



Show How Quickly, Radically (and Permanently?) Church Is Changing in 2020,” careynieuwhof.com.

³ David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group, multiple sources.

⁴ Benjamin J. Dueholm, “What We See Reminds Us of What We Miss, and Vice Versa,” *The Christian Century*,

But don't let the antiquity of the image obscure the point of the story, which is that Jesus ascends to become Lord of all the world. From death to life, from crucifixion to resurrection, from criminal to king, from cross to crown, he goes. It really is an Ascension, if not in space, still then in power.

Then the Book of Acts becomes a sprawling magnificence, telling the story of the Church's explosion from an invisible, infinitesimal singularity into a cosmic, globe-spanning faith. Acts is filled with jaw-dropping miracles, spine-tingling sermons, improbable conversions, fearless empire-defiers, and invincible advance.

There stand the disciples staring slack-jawed into the sky as he blasts off, and these two messengers from the great blue beyond ask them, "Why stand ye gazing into the heavens? Get busy! You are to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth." To the ends of the earth. To continue his ministry in his absence. To make the lame walk, to restore sight to the blind, to liberate the impoverished from their tenelements, to welcome the immigrant to a new home. The likes of you and me!

What an 18 months it's been, yes? But what have we to fear from all the cataclysms that keep battering the Church across the centuries? This tiny, little, microscopic virus is no match for the Church. Our church is still around. THE Church is still around. It's just left the building.⁵ And maybe that's a good thing. We will still be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

What an 18 months it's been. What a 20 years it's been, since September 11, 2001. Twenty years later, we're still facing the aftermath of what began on that day. Five of the 13 U.S. soldiers who died in Kabul in August were born in 2001. Like 9/11 itself, they were 20 years old.

U.S. Marine Corps Lance Corporal Rylee McCollum of Jackson, Wyoming, was born in February 2001, so he was six months old when the Twin Towers fell. His life was bookended by this lingering conflict. He got married on Valentine's Day this year. His wife is expecting their first child. He died freeing the innocent from primitive but still seething malice. His father said, "Tough as nails. Heart of gold."⁶ Rest in peace, Corporal McCollum. Thank you.

"This tiny, little,
microscopic virus is
no match for
the Church."

It took them four hours to read the names of those who perished on 9/11. There were six Garcia's, 10 Jones's, and 15 Smith's. So many precious souls.

But one woman who spoke yesterday said, "I remember September 12 just as clearly as September 11. So many tears. So much anguish. Such bitter ache. But then all of America started reaching out to us. So much kindness. So many prayers. Such rich blessings. It all brought us back to the land of the living." And we've been reaching out to embrace for 20 years, and we will never stop.

Adrienne Rich says,
My heart is moved by all I cannot save.
So much has been destroyed.
I have to cast my lot with those who,
Age after age, perversely,
With no extraordinary power,
Reconstitute the world.

We will be his witnesses, to the ends of the earth, until he comes again to take us all home.

⁵ Carey Nieuwhof, "Three Shocking Statistics..." *op. cit.*

⁶ Jack Healy and Dave Philipps, "Marine Barely Older Than War Is Killed Bringing It to an End," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2021.

9/11/2001 Tribute
—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

It is hard to comprehend the billions of stars overhead, but focus on one star, and the rest seem to come into view. When it comes to remembering the impact of September 11, 2001 on our nation and the world, we also find it hard to concentrate: so many billions of directions from which memory, healing, and hurt can unfurl. So in order to focus, Bill and Christine and I will read portraits of 10 individuals who died that day, and then, with specificity and a more embodied focus, we will offer up our prayers to God. 20 bells will toll to remember 20 years.

PORTRAITS: 9/11/01

Bill: Even in a family of 12 siblings, Rosanne Lang stood out. “She danced the longest, sang the loudest—even though she couldn’t carry a tune—and she loved the fiercest,” said her brother, Gerard. At 42, Ms. Lang was an equities trader at Cantor Fitzgerald. She was the first girl after her parents had six sons.

Katie: Gertrude Alagero, a senior vice president at Marsh Private Client Services, planned to marry Peter Walther in Boston on Jan. 5. A few days before the terrorist attack, Mr. Walther said, she pressed her fingers to his mouth while they were walking toward the subway from their Upper West Side apartment. “Shhh,” she said, “I need to tell you something: I am the luckiest woman in the world.”

Christine: “Big hugs!” is how Thomas R. Clark used to announce his arrivals home to his wife Lisa—a prelude to wrapping his arms around her. When their only son, Matthew, now 2, grew old enough to speak, he asked for a piece of the action. “Me too,” he’d squeal. Soon Mr. Clark changed his opening line to “Family hugs!” Mr. Clark worked at Sandler O’Neill & Partners. “We still do it, the three of us,” Mrs. Clark said, “and my son still smiles. He loves it.” Mr. Clark was 37.

Bill: Math and mitzvahs--those words ran through his family’s memories of Steven Furman, a broker at Cantor Fitzgerald who died two days shy of his 41st birthday. Mr. Furman’s math score on his SAT was 790 out of 800, according to his brothers, Michael and Andrew. “He always wondered where the other 10 points went,” Andrew said. “He knew he’d gotten them all right.” Mr. Furman joined Cantor last April. He didn’t have a fancy house or a fancy car,” said his sister Jayne Furman. “The more money he made, the more money he gave away.”

Katie: Every year just before Thanksgiving, Thomas Haskell, 37, Battalion chief for Ladder Company 132 in Brooklyn, would start disappearing into the basement of his home in Massapequa, N.Y., for hours, forbidding anyone else to come down. “He’d stay up till 3 a.m.,” said his wife, Barbara Haskell. Then about two weeks before Christmas, his wife, daughters, friends, and other relatives would be invited downstairs to see an elaborate winter landscape with hundreds of tiny ceramic figures, surrounded by ski chalets, with three separate train sets running through it all. In 2000 he built three miniature towns—Meaghanville, Erinburg, and Taratown, named for his daughters—along with Barbara’s Garden, for his wife. Behind them all was a dark blue night sky, lit up with electric stars.

Christine: Timothy Haskell trained his Dalmatian, Blaze, to “stop, drop, and roll.” He took the dog to the school where his sister, Dawn Haskell-Carbone, teaches. “Timmy would say to the dog, “Your clothes are on fire? What do you do?” she recalled yesterday. “Blaze would stop, throw herself on the ground, and roll. He would ask the kids, ‘What if you smell smoke?’ The dog would crawl on his belly over to a door. Timmy would say, ‘Feel the door first to see if it’s hot.’ And the dog would put her paws on the door.” Timothy’s brother, Thomas, also died in the World Trade Center attack.

Bill: Kenny Marino was a firefighter with Rescue 1 in Manhattan. His favorite baseball player was Ken Griffey. After he died at the World Trade Center, his wife Katrina e-mailed Mr. Griffey and asked him to hit a home run for her husband.” On September 25, Mr. Griffey, in his second at-bat against Philadelphia, obliged Mrs. Marino. He said it would always stand out as one of the most memorable he had hit. The bat was later given to Mrs. Marino and her two children.

Katie: Leo Roberts spent every day stalking the sidelines. Fall meant Michael’s soccer matches and Jeffrey’s and Daniel’s football games. Winter was for Taylor’s competitive cheerleading. “We would get up and we would plan who would be on what field with what kid,” said his wife, Debra Roberts, 43. “That is the way we lived. We lived for our kids.”

Christine: David Silver had a 2-year-old daughter, Rachel. The shape of her eyes and nose are his. She is going to be tall just like her father, said her mother, who was nine months pregnant when David died on September 11. On Friday nights, he often surprised his wife with a bouquet of fresh flowers that he had bought at Grand Central Terminal. “It’s like Friday night and I expect him to come with a bunch of flowers. It’s hard.”

Bill: Patricia Greene-Wotton is planning a memorial service and a baptism. Her husband, Rodney J. Wotton, disappeared in the attacks on Sept. 11, and their son, Rodney Patrick, was born eight days later. “It’s like death and resurrection,” she said. “The baptism was to have been a happy occasion, but it’s a sad thing knowing that Rod will not be there for the baby’s baptism.” Mr. Wotton, 36, who worked at Fiduciary Trust, never found out whether his child was a girl or a boy.

Katie: God of mud and breath, you mold shapeless dust and into it whisper life. From dust we have come and to the dust we shall return. We remember that before there was war, revenge, terror there was something more fragile and beautiful: a fierce love and kindness in the chaos. Before there was gun, there was garden. Before there was nuclear arsenal there was Big Bang. Before there was malice, there was possibility. We mourn all over again, twenty years later, because our grief is wrapped up in the magnitude of loss, and because deep down, in the center of things, we know there must be another way. The fragments of debris from that crystal morning twenty years ago force us to stand vigil, waiting and watching and living for a fleeting vision of your kingdom, where love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self control prevail. Bouquets of flowers, home runs, dalmatians, baptisms, family hugs, the song and dance of those who died: it reminds us that love is stronger than hate. Shift us, O God. Awaken us. Turn us. Move us. Put in our midst your peace that passes all understanding, a peace within and a peace between. For all those who mourn, whether a grief carried these many years, or the fresh infinity of this year’s loss. For all those who serve, whether on the front lines, or as essential workers, or as good Samaritans along the broken way. For all those who hope, for a possible peace and the promise of healing. In the silence between the bells, hear our prayer, O God. (Toll the 20 bells.)

And hear us as we lift our voices, to pray Jesus’ prayer of peace... Our Father...