

May 24, 2020
“No Hands But Ours”
Acts 1:6-14 / John 17:1-11
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Those of you who've been in or around churches long enough have likely heard or read some variation of a story, set during World War II, of a church building destroyed by bombings. After the bombings the church members surveyed the damage and were pleased to find that a statue of Jesus with outstretched hands was still standing. They were, however—and those of you who know this story know what I'm about to say—they were discouraged to find that both hands of the statue had been sheered off.

A sculptor in town offered to replace the broken hands as a gift to the church but church leaders met and decided to leave the statue as it was—with Jesus' outstretched arms, but no hands.

It is a compelling story, though I have come to learn, as you may have, that there's no evidence that it actually happened as it's been circulated. Variations of the story have spread over the years—one about a church in England, another about a cathedral in Germany (which I think is how I first heard it), a third about a village in France and still another about a village in Africa. I've read that there is, or at least was, a similar statue at a church in Soweto, South Africa, damaged in this same way during apartheid when policed attacked a banned church meeting.

But apparently the story, as it's evolved over time, as stories sometimes do, originated at Christ the King Catholic Church in San Diego, California – where about 30 years ago a statue of Jesus was simply vandalized, hands knocked off. The statue was indeed left intentionally with no hands, and it remains there with a plaque below it reading, “I have no hands but yours.”

I have no hands but yours. This statement recalling the famous poem from the 16th-century Spanish monastic and mystic, Teresa of Avila:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

No matter where it came from, I can't help but think of that story, which I heard for the first time as a kid, when I hear these texts surrounding Jesus' ascension.

We get the preview, as it were, in John's gospel, in the form of what turns out to be Jesus' final prayer with his disciples, his prayer to God, before the crucifixion. This is not the actual ascension, but it is Jesus confirming that he and they belong to God, that he has come from God and is going back to God. It is Jesus praying for and preparing his disciples for what is soon coming—and that is captured in verse 11: "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you."

I am no longer in the world, but THEY are in the world. Jesus is preparing them for a reality where he—their teacher, the one they dropped fishing nets and tax documents and left families behind to follow, the one who has turned their lives upside down (radically, but in a good way), will no longer be with them in the flesh. It is a sobering moment, and a sobering prayer—just before the intensity of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion.

It's worth noting here that this prayer is only found in John's gospel. What you find in the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, is the perhaps more familiar prayer in the garden of Gethsemane—also just before Jesus is arrested and sent before Pilate. The agonizing prayer where he asks that God "remove this cup" of suffering from him, if possible, while also acknowledging his willingness to suffer if necessary. The prayer where Jesus keeps finding his disciples asleep.

As it continues in John's gospel, beyond our reading this morning, we get what I see as an extension of verse 11, "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world," in verses 14-16: "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one (or some translations simply say, "from evil"). They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world."

And so taken together we hear the exhortation that they are IN the world, but not OF the world. Jesus goes on in verse 18: "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

Jesus is reminding his disciples, and so us who have any desire or intention to follow him and his way, that though they, though we, are in the world, and indeed sent into the world, they and we do not belong to the world. They, and we, all of us, all of us, all of us, belong to God as God's own, as God's beloved.

This is a profound grounding, a profound spiritual identity, in a world that threatens to uproot us—individually and collectively—in so many ways. I will no longer be with you in the world, in the flesh, but remember who and whose you are. YOU are my flesh, God's flesh, in the world. And you have work to do.

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

And then in Acts we hear the story of the ascension itself, which is how the book begins. Acts is introduced as a companion volume to the gospel of Luke, and indeed the repeated dedications to Theophilus (meaning “lover of God” so that scholars suggest it could refer to a single person or to anyone who loves God), the similar literary style and the shared perspectives suggest common authorship. Where Luke’s gospel is, of course, about Jesus, Acts shifts to the life and work of the early Christian community (more on that next week with Pentecost!).

In the text we heard this morning, the resurrected Jesus promises them the gift of the Holy Spirit, God’s Spirit, and the power that comes with it—that they may be his witnesses in the world. And then he is dramatically lifted up, on a cloud, out of sight, and the disciples’ gaze stays up with him. And two men, presumably angels, suddenly appear: “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 have seen him go into heaven.” Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?

When I left for college, my parents drove up with me, with all my stuff. About a three-hour drive from where I grew up. And my sister, who was then living nearby where I went to school, also met us.

After we got everything moved in, met my roommate and all that, they hung around. I can’t remember now if we grabbed a bite to eat, or maybe just walked around campus a bit, or both, but I can remember like it was yesterday that I did not want them to leave! And when it was finally time for them to go, I can tell you that I was a hot mess.

We had a tradition, still have a tradition, in my family that whenever someone is leaving (and I mean for an extended period of time, of course, not a run to the grocery store!), we all wave to each other until we can no longer see each other. Amy, and now Gabe, have gotten used to this tradition when we say goodbye to my family.

So when my parents and my sister all drove away that day, I waved, and I kept waving, and I even walked a bit in the direction they were driving to keep them in sight a little longer. I was already crying, but when they were out of sight, I lost it (I’m tearing up now just thinking about it). I was not ready to let them go, I did not feel ready to turn back toward this new life, this new and unknown reality and the work I needed to do. So I just stood there for a while.

Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? And here, I think, we are right to recall two previous mystical, miraculous, otherworldly (which is to say, not of this world) experiences with Jesus and his disciples.

We remember the Transfiguration, atop Mt. Sinai. Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James and John, his face shines like the sun, his clothes becoming dazzling white, and Moses and Elijah appear suddenly in their midst, talking with Jesus. A bright cloud overshadows, and we hear the same voice we heard at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased, listen to him!"

Peter wants to pitch a tent and stay awhile. And the disciples are afraid, but Jesus tells them not to be afraid, to get up, and promptly calls them back down the mountain even if they are still afraid. Back into the world. Because there is work to do.

And we remember, of course, in this ongoing season of Easter, the resurrection. In Matthew's account, there is a great earthquake, and an angel of the Lord descends from heaven, rolls back the stone—with appearance like "lightning" and clothes "white as snow." And the risen Christ appears, and Mary Magdalene and the other Mary leave the tomb with "fear and great joy" to go and share the good news with the disciples. In John's gospel, Jesus appears only to Mary Magdalene, and says to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to God."

Do not hold onto me. Do not be afraid. The same sentiments we hear in the story of Jesus' resurrection and transfiguration we hear in the angel's question following Jesus' dramatic ascension, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

I am no longer in the world but YOU are. Why do you stand looking up toward heaven, why do hold onto me, why do you insist on pitching tents on the mountain when your work is on the ground? Down the mountain. In the world. Your work, Jesus says, is to continue my work, God's work, which is to make earth like heaven. So keep your eyes where they belong. Remember who and whose you are. Remember that you are not alone. And remember that, empowered by my spirit, God's spirit, you are my flesh in the world.

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

What I really love about this story from Acts is what happens next. The disciples turn their attention to the journey ahead. They return to Jerusalem, back to the upstairs room where they shared a final meal with Jesus, where they huddled together in fear after

Jesus was crucified, where they all witnessed for themselves the risen Christ. And as I see it, they got to work. Verse 14: “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”

Prayer to help them keep their eyes where they belonged, to stay grounded in the lives to which Jesus called them, grounded in the work that Jesus started—in the world, but not of it. To stay grounded in who and whose they were. And prayer understood in all its forms—we pray with our hearts, for sure, and we also pray with our hands, and with our feet. We pray with our bodies. We pray with our lives.

There is a simple prompt in Quaker tradition, meant to support the process of discernment, and it goes like this, “Is this your work to do?” Is this your work to do?

As we consider what it means to continue the work that Jesus started in the world, to be Jesus’ hands in the world in the midst of and visioning beyond a devastating global pandemic that has further exposed and exacerbated the prevailing injustice, intersecting injustices, embedded into the ruptured fabric of our deeply broken social and economic structures, structures that weigh most forcefully and persistently on black and brown minds and bodies and spirits . . .

As we consider what it means to continue the work that Jesus started, to be Jesus’ hands in the world, in the midst of significant and ongoing transition within our own community at Calvary—with my departure from this role and the arrival in July of a new pastor, still grieving Pastor John’s departure, working through a complicated process of discernment about what our future looks like at the corner of 48th & Baltimore, wondering what will become of the United Methodist Church as we know it, in all of its brokenness . . .

As we consider what it means to continue the work Jesus started, to be Jesus’ hands in the world, I want to invite you all—us all—to spend some time with a variation of that Quaker prompt, “What is my work to do? What is our work to do together as a church?” In this community. In this city. within the larger Christian church. In this world.

We have an opportunity, friends, a responsibility, to do whatever we can to ensure that the world that functioned so care-lessly and cruelly before the pandemic, and now during the pandemic, is not the world to which we return after. We have a responsibility to be Jesus’ hands in the world, in our own communities, in ways that bring new life. In ways that insist, as just one example, that “essential” workers get paid and treated accordingly. In ways that insist, as another example, that the earth is in desperate need of healing—that this brief period of relative rest enabled by global shut-down and stay-at-home orders must be a final, all hands-on-deck wake-up call that the capitalist status quo that puts profits before the planet is literally killing the earth, and us with it.

This is an opportunity for Jubilee, friends, an opportunity to radically restructure the world and the communities in which we live, to work to restore the land and its people to health and well-being, marked by fullness and security, where everyone and everything has enough. Another world is possible.

As activist and author Arundhati Roy writes, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

What is YOUR work to do, what is OUR work to do, to help make another world possible—the world we want and need, and the world that God desires for all of us and for the earth itself?

With those questions of discernment in mind, I am planning over the last five weeks of my role as interim pastor—and beyond as needed—to talk with all of you who find a home at Calvary. I want to hear where you are, how you're feeling through all of this, and where you see yourself and this community in imagining and working for another world.

I want to encourage us, individually and collectively, to step more boldly and courageously and prophetically into the life-giving work of community-building and justice and reconciliation and healing and truth-telling and peacemaking to which we are called. Because that was Jesus' work. Because that is our work.

Why do you stand looking toward heaven? I am no longer in the world, but YOU are in the world, though not of it.

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

May it be so.