

**“EXPECTATION SUNDAY”**

**May 4, 2008 – 7 Easter – Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ**

**Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

My New Testament professor, Reggie Fuller, speaks of this Sunday as “Expectation Sunday.” We are caught once again in a time of transition between The Feast of the Ascension and the Feast of Pentecost. Here we are waiting, waiting for the gift that Jesus promised the disciples. Karl Barth, the German theologian, called this a “significant pause” in the Gospel story.

What is happening is that we are being prepared for a personal transformation. Jesus has left, again, and the disciples (and we) are wrestling with the absence of Jesus. The disciples had come to depend on the physical presence of Jesus. He preached, taught and healed in their presence. The crucifixion took Jesus suddenly and tragically away ... but the miracle of Easter brought his presence back to him. During this Easter season we have heard of the appearances of the Risen Lord to the disciples ... but the Ascension changes all of that. Now Jesus is gone.

As we read the Book of Acts, we see three things. The disciples are told to wait. They are promised the gift of the Spirit, a gift that will empower them. And, they act ... they pray and witness to what has transpired during their following Jesus. Herb O’Driscoll notes that something very important has happened here. Responsibility for the ministry that Jesus started passes from him to the disciples. Something new is happening ... the Church is coming into being. What we are seeing are Jesus’ followers to witness to Jesus Christ. They are seeing and sharing the new realities!

Can you imagine waiting? Now that is anti-cultural! We don’t like to wait for anything or anybody! This past week I went to the Acme to pick up some groceries. I’m one of those people who scan the lines to see which one is moving the quickest, so I don’t have to wait! As I moved through the line, there was a problem with the register. By the time I got to the checkout, the computers crashed!

Have you ever tried to buy food in a store when the computers don’t work? You can’t! After 5 minutes, I contemplated leaving the food and leaving. No, that wouldn’t do. Maybe I could take the food back and go. I didn’t. It was 20 minutes later when the computers finally worked, but only if you could pay cash! Now how many of us have enough cash to buy our groceries when we go to the store? I finally fished through my wallet, debating what things I might put back if I didn’t have enough cash. At last I made it! After all that waiting!

But waiting is especially what we sometimes need. It certainly was what the disciples needed. It was time to collect thoughts, wait for what God would do next, and prepare for the new way of being into which they were being called! Sometimes God prompts us to wait ... for something great to happen! This is where we find ourselves today.

There are some interesting things going on in the text today. Three things pop out for me and I think they challenge us to contemplate what the Church is evolving into. First, the disciples ask Jesus, “When can we expect the kingdom and what will it look like?” We know what they wanted. The disciples were looking for the glory days of David and

**“EXPECTATION SUNDAY”**

**May 4, 2008 – 7 Easter – Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ**

**Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

**Solomon. They wanted a political, or military or economic hero that would put them at the top of the heap in the world. But we know that this is not the way Jesus worked. He was none of these things. God had decided in Jesus to work in a completely different way.**

**The something new that happens here is that Jesus places responsibility for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth in our hands. We are to take the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ and make it the model for the kingdom here and now. We are to build a Church that reflects the way of Jesus in the faith community.**

**Something so powerful is taking place here. It is a dialogue and conversation that is needed in every generation between Christ and the Church. We must ask ourselves, “How will we be God’s people in this place at this time?” We are in that debate right now. It started back when Peter and Paul differed over how the Church would go and we continue to discuss it now.**

**What I see now saddens me at times. There are those who want more rules, more structure ... and this will mean some will be excluded and others unable to be part of the community. This smacks too much the way of the Pharisees in the Gospels. They were so often more possessed with the rules and regulations that they actually missed God’s presence in their midst. I fear that too often we are missing the major teachings of Jesus, like love and forgiveness and reconciliation, to push agendas that have more to do with power and control rather than faith.**

**I have long admired the Church’s ability to be tolerance, inclusive and understanding. I fear that we are abandoning the “middle way” to drift towards a system that we long ago rejected as not Episcopal. I want the church that welcomes, invites, explores, and embodies the love of God, not the rules of a god. I want to see hope, healing, relationship and love as the ways of the Church. I want this to be the place where we can come and explore our relationship with God.**

**The next thing I see in Acts is when Jesus ascends. I have a picture of the disciples standing there, looking up into to skies with their mouths wide open ... gaping at where Jesus had just been. Then we hear two men, angels, speaking. “Why are you standing around looking up there? Go!” I have this image of the disciples standing on the Mount of Olives, their heads craned up to the sky; their mouths open ... gaping at where Jesus once was!**

**Too often we look up to heaven and wait for God to drop it (the answer, the money, the solution, whatever) down out of heaven and into our laps. But God chooses to do it differently. God chooses to work through us! We are encourage to understand that we will encounter God in every person we meet ... be they another Christian, a Jew, a Muslim or a stranger. Our calling is to see Christ in each other, and to treat each other with respect. I love that phrase from our baptismal liturgy that calls us to “respect the dignity of every human being.”**

**“EXPECTATION SUNDAY”**

**May 4, 2008 – 7 Easter – Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ**

**Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

**We no longer have the direct, tangible and visible presence of Jesus in our midst. Now we are invited to see Christ in the midst of the Christian community, we are Christ’s presence on earth! We have to stop hoping for a spiritual “lottery” wins that will give us all the spirituality and spiritual resolve we seek. The challenge is for us to stop looking up, or around, and get focused where we are ... to pray ... and to be the community of faith.**

**Finally, why go back to Jerusalem? The disciples are challenged to be witnesses in the city ... to share the Good News. What we forget is that Jerusalem was a scary place for the disciples. Yes, it was the religious center of their world ... but these were simple, country folk, they had to go back and deal with the unfamiliar (there were a long way from home) and the threatening (remember this is where Jesus was crucified!). But they go and act immediately. While they are waiting, they pray and witness. This is both a starting point and a transformation point for the disciples.**

**What we are invited to reflect and act upon today is how the vision of Jesus Christ becomes our vocation. We too are told to tell the story. Now it is our time to wait ... but also to pray and witness. Here at Grace, we are to become that transformed community that models itself after Jesus Christ. Around us, such as in Camden, we are called to be witnesses that reach out in love with a promise of hope. Maybe it will take the shape of an ever-growing food ministry. It might be answering the call to help start a free medical clinic. Perhaps it might be shaped by an environmental ministry that helps churches and people to be better stewards of the creation. The shape will become clearer to us. The Holy Spirit will come and help us to make sense of it later.**

**So here we are ... waiting, praying and witnessing. Here we are ... preparing to be transformed by the promise of Jesus Christ. Here we are ... trying to live into the vision. May God help us to respond with our hearts and souls! Amen.**