

Now What?

Acts 4:32-35, John 20:19-31

The First Church of Christ in Hartford, Connecticut

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The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

I have a friend named Ashley who thought she was going to die, and now has been told she should expect a normal lifespan. Wonderful news! But after several years of assuming the cancer in her esophagus and liver would kill her in her mid-30's, after planning for how to spend her small remaining life and preparing mentally for death, suddenly, after an experimental therapy worked wonders on her body, she had to plan for long life! Believe it or not, this was rather disconcerting for her! For more than a couple of years, all her mental and physical energy went toward living as fully as she could, assuming the time was short. Now it was long! She writes eloquently about her struggle with the question, "Now what?" When you think death is what life is all about, then suddenly you are gifted with new life, what do you do?

That's where the disciples were in that week after the risen Christ appeared to them. The day before Easter, they were no doubt trying to figure out how to go back to life as fishermen or whatever they did before following Jesus, and the dream that had died. Could they reconnect with family they had left behind? Could they figure out life as usual when nothing in their mind was usual anymore? Should they just prepare to be arrested and killed?

Then Jesus appeared, and appeared with a charge to them: "As God sent me, so I send you." Where? To do what? Details are a little vague, at least in the versions we have of the encounter. In John, Jesus tells them to have a ministry of forgiveness. In other gospels, they are called to teach Jesus' message, and to baptize, and to be witnesses of all they had seen and heard. They were called to give testimony, as Terrence did for us today, so that others might connect with God and live life abundant.

The “Now what?” here is actually pretty basic. Share a message rooted in God’s mercy and create a community (through baptism) dedicated to living into the teaching of Jesus.

Which is pretty much what they did. The book of Acts details their work. The little snippet we heard today talks about them creating a community of testimony to grace and sharing with one another so that no one was in need.

My friend Ashley had been working for IRIS, the refugee agency, when she was diagnosed with cancer. Now, with her new promise of life, she is throwing herself wholeheartedly into her job, loving and caring for refugees who come to Connecticut with nothing but hope. She helps us all share what we have with them and testifies through her actions to the love of God. She helps them find community with one another and with new American companions. She has taken her cue for “Now what?” from those disciples in Acts. And she is happy to seize the years ahead from the grave.

All these thoughts about seizing life from death reminded me of a book The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote near the end of his life entitled *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community?* In this book, he reflects on the successes of the civil rights movement, but also the rise in violent actions by those impatient with the slow progress made in dealing with racism, poverty, an inferior education system, the beginnings of the move to mass incarceration of black men, and the many deaths of black soldiers in Vietnam. He feared that chaos in this nation would be the result, instead of the Beloved Community he truly envisioned could be our future in America.

As we, both as individuals and as a church, live into remembering once again that we are a Resurrection people, those who seize life from the grave, called to testify to everyone of God’s love and mercy, and as we remember Jesus’ challenges to us to truly love God and each other with all we are and have, we might

also remember Dr. King's question in the America of 2018. Those disciples in that Jerusalem apartment for a week after Jesus' appearance must have asked the same question, "Where do we go from here: chaos or community?" Their ultimate answer was to create communities all over the Middle East, Asia and Europe dedicated to continuing to testify to God's grace and live into Jesus' way.

The life of these communities was not always smooth, as we discover when we read on in Acts. As Dr. King wrote, "the line of progress is never straight." (in *Where Do We Go from Here?* Found in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 562) Sometimes we are tempted to fall into this death-obsessed society in which we live and either despair or settle for self-medication with addictions or entertainment that takes us away from true, loving, sharing community. Sometimes in our churches we fail at creating the kind of communities those disciples sought to shape.

That's why we need to keep asking ourselves this "Now what?" question, this "Where do we go from here: chaos or community?" question. I can't stress enough how important I think it is for every Christian church to wrestle with this question right now. The world, the nation, the society around us is in chaos, and I really don't think I need to give you any examples of that. One antidote to chaos is community. It has happened over and over again throughout history. I was talking with our bookkeeper, Charlotte, this week, and she told me her family has roots in the French Huguenot communities of the 19th and 20th centuries. Which reminded me of the amazing Huguenot Protestant community of Le Chambon sur Lignon, which came together to rescue Jews fleeing the Holocaust during World War II, shepherding many hundreds over the Swiss border to safety. If one person in that community had revealed their work to the German authorities controlling that part of France, many in the village would have been imprisoned or killed. But no one did, not for years. Community stood against chaos. Resurrection people stood against those dealing in death.

Similar stories come out of Haiti, when those enslaved Africans successfully overthrew those who had enslaved them, and out of Korea in the early 20th century when communities banded together to save their language, their culture and their very names when the Japanese forced them to give up all three, and on and on.

So, Center Church, on the Sunday after we have remembered the Resurrection, where do we go from here? In a time of chaos, what kind of community do we become? What kind of community do we spread?

As I thought about this, I sat looking at our windows, which I have begun to think are constant messages to us from the Holy Spirit. I was in here on Thursday watering my improbably living gladiolus when I noticed that on either side of us here we have windows with messages for us. This one tells the story we heard last week, and the one across the room shows us a bit of an answer to our question about the community we might be in the midst of chaos. See here, all around Jesus, people listening to what he has to say, receiving the love of his arms around them, mercy and care, holding each other, men and women and children together. It's a snapshot, a vision; so, what does it lead us to in here, down the street and out in the streets? How do we form together a community of deep love and life that spreads that love and life in a world obsessed with death?

Friends, let's come out on the side of life, on the side of community. Let's explore how we might more fully create a community of grace and sharing, testifying in word and deed to each other and to the folk out there to the love of Jesus and our love for each other. Like my friend Ashley and those befuddled disciples, let us seize life in a God-centered community! Amen.