

“Rise Up”  
The Rev. Lauren McDonald  
Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA  
Easter 7 (Ascension readings), June 2, 2019  
Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:43-54

Today is the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, the last Sunday before Pentecost. Today we are remembering Jesus’ Ascension into heaven with our readings and hymns, and yet, instead of feeling celebratory, it feels more like Good Friday. Another shooting two days ago, this time in our own neighborhood of Hampton Roads. Twelve people killed and more injured. Instead of proclaiming Alleluia, Alleluia, it feels like we should be lamenting and crying out, “How long, O Lord, how long?”

Another day, another shooting. Another day, more violence. Another day, more lives lost, more potential gone, more families and friends grieving. When does it end?

I would like to ask with the disciples, “Lord, is *this* when you will restore the kingdom?” But Jesus’ answer will be, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set.” It is not for us to know when God will put things to rights. Though I sure wish it were now. In the meantime, what can we do?

Our lessons today tell us what followers of Jesus are to do in the meantime. Be witnesses of Jesus.

Wait to be clothed with power from on high.  
Proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all the nations in his name.

When I used to sit in the pew on Sunday mornings and listen to sermons, I would often agree with and even be inspired by what the preacher was saying. Yes, yes, I would think. Be witnesses of Jesus. Listen for the Spirit. Proclaim repentance and forgiveness. Yes. Okay. I’m ready.

But how?

How do we put into action Jesus’ message to the original disciples?  
In a way, they did exactly what he did – not rising from the dead and ascending into heaven as he did, but they did rise up out of their grief and despair at having witnessed him die. They rose up out of the ashes of the dreams they had had of the kingdom of Israel being restored by a powerful earthly king. And after they watched Jesus rise up to be with God, they didn’t grieve that he had left them again

but instead went back to the temple in Jerusalem to wait pray and rejoice until the Holy Spirit blew in and raised them to a whole new level of discipleship.

Yesterday I found myself thinking about images of rising up – the sun rising every morning out of the darkness of night, the phoenix rising from the ashes.

Atlanta Falcons fans shouting “Rise up!” to cheer their team on.

Birds rising up on air currents.

Bread rising through the aid of yeast.

Jesus rising from the dead, and then rising into heaven.

How do we rise up as followers of Jesus, to ascend from the depths of grief and despair that we feel each time one of these shootings occurs?

How do we rise out of our culture of violence and vengeance and angry rhetoric? How do we rise above the hostility and division that prevent us from being able to work together to find solutions to any of the myriad problems our country faces?

We wait, we pray, we listen for the Holy Spirit. We witness to the power of love and redemption shown to us by Jesus. We proclaim repentance and forgiveness.

It begins right in our back yards.

Someone shared a story with me yesterday from the Washington Post. The title is “I Hated My Neighbor.”<sup>1</sup> Peggy, the author, tells the story of living next door to a dog who barked outside late into the night, preventing her from getting the sleep she needed for her job as a morning news anchor. She started by asking her neighbor to take the dog indoors, but the neighbor refused. Then she filed a noise complaint. The neighbor lured her cat into her yard with a trap in retaliation and sent the cat to the pound. Peggy decided to sue. Court date set for Christmas Eve.

When her in-laws arrived for Christmas, she asked their advice. Her father-in-law who had been a prisoner of war and had forgiven his captors said, “If you’re going to be a follower of Jesus, you’ll love your enemy, not sue her.”

After some soul searching, Peggy went over, apologized to her neighbor for escalating the conflict and asked her to let her know if there was anything she could do to be a better neighbor. A few weeks later the neighbor asked to borrow money for milk for her child. The two women began talking and became friends, and the neighbor’s dog ceased barking at night.

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<sup>1</sup>Peggy Wehmeyer, Washington Post, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/05/31/i-hated-my-neighbor-then-one-lesson-led-life-changing-friendship/?utm\\_term=.4bc5ec666613](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/05/31/i-hated-my-neighbor-then-one-lesson-led-life-changing-friendship/?utm_term=.4bc5ec666613)

It turned out that the neighbor was warm and kind but struggled with depression. Peggy became an important person in the neighbor's life.

It starts with the people in the space right around us. Family, neighbors, people in the grocery store or on the road or serving our food or sitting next to us on the bus to school.

People of God, we can do this.

We can rise above our need to be right and reach out to those with whom we disagree.

We can rise up and follow Jesus in the way of love, letting go of judgment and selfishness and proclaiming repentance and forgiveness.

We can rise out of the ashes of despair and work together to create a world that's safe for all people. Where all people can get the help they need.

Those are some things we can do while we wait for the kingdom of God to be fully realized. Starting right with the people who most irritate us. As hard as it is, that's where we start. The question is, will we?

Bruce Springsteen wrote a song called "My City of Ruins" about Asbury Park in New Jersey, near where he grew up. He wrote it for a Christmas concert to benefit the city's revitalization. Many of the images in the song describe the city's deterioration. It took on new meaning when he sang it as a tribute to New York during a benefit concert after September 11. He's sung it in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in New Zealand, and to raise funds for Haiti. It seems appropriate for our time, too. Like many of the Psalms, it starts as a lament.

There's a blood red circle  
On the cold dark ground  
And the rain is falling down.  
The church door's thrown open  
I can hear the organ's song  
But the congregation's gone  
My city of ruins.

Now the sweet bells of mercy  
Drift through the evening trees  
Young men on the corner  
Like scattered leaves

The boarded up windows  
The empty streets  
While my brother's down on his knees  
My city of ruins.

The song begins as a lament, but after the third verse, Bruce turns it into a prayer for strength and renewal and then into a call for action. A chorus sings repeatedly,

Now with these hands  
With these hands  
With these hands  
With these hands, I pray Lord  
I pray for the strength Lord  
I pray for the faith, Lord  
We pray for your love, Lord  
I pray for the loss, Lord  
I pray for this world, Lord  
I pray for the strength, Lord  
With these hands  
With these hands  
Come on, rise up  
Come on, rise up

I'd like to share a prayer with you written by Bishop Jay Magness who will be with us next Sunday for Confirmation.

**Let us pray.** O God of mercy, you sustain us with your grace as we live in a world which seems to abound in violence and hatred. Today our hearts are particularly heavy as we mourn the loss of life in Virginia Beach. We remember before you those whose lives were taken from them, those who have been injured and all who grieve. Thank you for the valiant and heroic intervention of all who acted to save the lives of the vulnerable. We pray, even plead, with you to deliver us from the temptation for vengeance, and to be reminded that our Lord calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Give us the courageous and faithful resolve to bring about justice for all. Guide our hearts and minds with the ultimate vision of your peaceful kingdom, that we never lose sight of the day when we all may stand before you as true brothers and sisters. AMEN.