

# *Filling the Gap*

by

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Acts 1:6-11; 15-17, 21-26

<sup>6</sup>So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” <sup>7</sup>He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup>While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup>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.”

<sup>15</sup>In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, <sup>16</sup>“Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— <sup>17</sup>for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

<sup>21</sup>So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup>beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” <sup>23</sup>So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. <sup>24</sup>Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup>to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” <sup>26</sup>And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

This has to be the most Presbyterian of scripture readings. Now I know it would be fifteen hundred years before the Reformation would give rise to our version of Christian faith and practice, but you've got to admit these back to back episodes from Acts sound very Presbyterian. High, holy worship followed by a meeting. Indeed, they actually define the rhythm of the life of faith.

The disciples enjoy a glorious moment of worship, when to their astonishment they are talking with the Risen Lord, and suddenly he is raised out of their sight and swallowed up in the clouds. For a moment they stand there with their necks craned back in awe and wonder, as the Risen Christ ascends to become Lord of all creation. The disciples take it all in, the ultimate fleeting glimpse of resurrection. Then as the two men in white remind them, you cannot stand looking up into heaven forever. So the next thing you know, they are having a meeting, a congregational meeting, no less, to find a replacement Apostle for Judas. Worship – work; awe and wonder – practical application; looking up toward the mystery of God – lowering their gaze and having to look at one another. Awe-filled wonderment, followed by practical, responsible corporate decision making for how to further the work of the One who just ascended.

We, in the church, do this all the time. A death comes upon us suddenly and sadly, and we ponder the mystery of resurrection, and then we take a casserole to the family, knowing that providing one meal gives them a little extra time and space to grieve. A crisis occurs in the community, and what do we do? We fall into prayer and we wonder how this could have possibly occurred, and ask “Where on earth is God right now?” and then we cluster together and organize ourselves and determine next steps for how to respond. Each week, we worship offering praise for the mystery and majesty of God as light shines through these windows, the vaulted ceiling lifts our spirits heavenward, and music rises to join the music of the spheres. Then we are sent out; we lower our gaze and look around, and do the things that Jesus has

taught us to do that manifest loving God and loving neighbor. This story from Acts is the rhythm of faith.

This story also reveals a curiosity that is so much like the church as we know it. Preaching professor Tom Long described the occasion this way: “Forty days after Easter, Jesus departs into the heavens; fifty days after Easter, the Spirit arrives from the heavens – twin peaks. It is ironic, however, that sandwiched between these two lofty experiences is a valley, an event so seemingly mundane as a congregational meeting called to select a replacement officer... There this odd story stands, filling the gap.”<sup>1</sup>

This filling the gap moment is the delight of Christian community. Each of us is uniquely gifted for service, and when one of us leaves us by dying or by moving away, or simply by drifting away, there are always others who come along and “fill the gap.” Then their sense of calling and spiritual gifts lead the church down new avenues of faithfulness. Here in Acts, at this critical juncture between the Ascension of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, this meeting takes place to elect a new apostle. A seemingly important moment!

But the curious thing is that after we are told that Matthias is chosen, we never hear of him again. Matthias is not mentioned in the rest of Acts, and his name never appears in the Letters of Paul or any other Epistles. The only thing we can make of this is that while Matthias was chosen to join the eleven chosen by Jesus himself, by the time the Spirit descends in the very next chapter he just blends in with all the rest. Matthias, it would appear, becomes a sort of Every Disciple! He is you, and you, and you!

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Long, “A Night at the Burlesque: Wanderings Through the Pentecost Narrative,” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 1994.

One of the wonderful blessings of the congregation I served before coming here, was a couple named Dale and Pat, and the particular gifts they brought to our congregational life. Dale and Pat actually taught me a new way of seeing. Without fail, whenever our paths crossed they would tell me, “It is so good to see you,” which was a curious greeting because both of them are blind, totally blind. They would *see* me by recognizing my voice or hearing my laughter in the hallway. They would *see* me by my touch with a handshake.

Now, it literally took a village to get them to church on Sundays and for Wednesday night suppers, and when Dale went through 45 radiation treatments it was a well-organized rotation of church members who drove him to each one. Each Thursday a retired banker would take the bulletin to them and they had someone print it in Braille. Almost every Sunday I would find myself moved watching them stand and sing the hymns with joy as they pressed the bulletins across the front of their bodies in order to finger the music, to feel and to read the words. Whatever it was that friends did for them to help them be fully involved in the life of the church, was surely matched by one key thing they did for us each year.

On Easter morning well before dawn the first service was a kind of hybrid of an Easter Vigil and Sunrise service. We entered the sanctuary with the little candles left over from Christmas Eve and would make our way to the pews singing “Jesus Remember Me When You Come into Your Kingdom.” Once inside we extinguished the candles and sat quietly for a moment in the darkness. Then the silence was broken by the only ones who are able, in absolute darkness, to read from the gospel: “Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Jesus...” Pat would begin. We sang a verse of “Were You There, When they Crucified my Lord” and then Dale read in the dark: “It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon...” After we listened to how Jesus had died and been put in the tomb, in a matter of minutes, of course, the birds were beginning to sing, the sun about to rise, and we would make our way

into the Memorial Garden to hear the Easter story of resurrection. But it was Dale and Pat, with their very special way of seeing, who made that holiest moment of the Christian year an experience of utter awe and wonder. They filled the gap; they gave that congregation something no one else could give quite like they did; they led us with their unique vision.

Our reading today, from the Ascension of Jesus to that funny little meeting to call Matthias invites us to consider more broadly how God chooses every follower to serve with individual, unique and special gifts. The faithfulness of Matthias did not draw the attention of the early church quite like Peter's preaching did. His personal sacrifice never became the feast day of A Christian martyr as did Stephen's. His conversion was not remembered in such a dramatic fashion as that of Paul. But without him, and all the others like him, there would not have been a community that would begin, using Paul's language, to look like the Body of Christ on earth. After the Ascension, the Body of Christ on earth in all its rich diversity, unique members with special gifts and work to do, each in need of the others, each bound together by the call of God, by water, and the Spirit. Luke also wants us to know that there were many faithful followers about whom we know very little, who were eligible for the position of disciple. All we have are the names of two nominees, Justus and Matthias, and the fact that Matthias won.

I believe we never hear another word about Matthias precisely because he is Dale and Pat, he is Bill and Linda, he is Scott and Kathy, Carol and Steve, Karen and Jim. He is each one of you. In the mysterious way that the stories of the Risen Christ gave rise to the work of the church, we are – each one of us, you see, Matthias.

During the pandemic, each of us has had to relate to the church differently for a time. Some of us joined small group discussions and classes for the first time. Some of us found new avenues to love God by serving our neighbors in creative ways. Some of us are committed more deeply to furthering the justice of God and making peace.

So as we begin to come back together, I challenge all of us to re-think our call to discipleship because each one of us has a role to play in “filling the gap” and fulfilling the complement of disciples. Ascended to heaven... Jesus reveals yet a new way of faithfulness. God needs the Body of Christ – the Church – on earth to stay together, with his life-giving work to do.

AMEN.