

May 25, Ascension of the Lord

Luke 24:44-53

by [Anne H. K. Apple](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue

“What if this Jesus thing is just a myth that we make up?”

Once a year, our church calls upon its high school seniors to preach the gospel. These six or seven preachers study the text, listen to their lives, and observe what’s going on in the world. Their sermons do not merely shout out the name of their favorite congregant or tireless youth worker. They testify to their experience of God’s promises in Christ Jesus. Some of them tell stories of God’s deeds of power, while others confess inklings of doubt.

And one young preacher, while we were working on preparing the sermons, dared to name his fear. What if we just make Jesus up?

We prepare these preachers using the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*. We practice silence and listening—together, in community, exploring and sharing through the word. One year we were in the church basement, looking at the Ascension Gospel text from Luke. “Oh, I get it, Ms. Anne!” said one young woman, sitting cross-legged on the floor. “We are witnesses—like, right now, like those disciples with Jesus forever ago!” Her enthusiasm surged as she scanned the room, looking into the eyes of her peers. She said, “Y’all—this stuff is real, like right now, for us!”

A peer of hers confronted her joy. “Yes, and it also says the Messiah is to suffer. And God knows, suffering is still around all of us. Open your eyes—the world suffers the injustices of war; every night children in our city go to bed hungry; and even some of us suffer for stuff we just do not want to talk about.” This young man’s confrontation, and his intimacy with the constant nature of suffering, pushed the group to explore the question, “What is the truth of Christ?” His sensitive heart was awakened to the suffering named in the gospel, and a kernel of doubt lingered there.

For us, as for those early disciples, holding the tension between the “what if” of doubt and the “what now” of faith requires us to tend to what is right before us. In an upper room, after the resurrection, the disciples navigate the winds of change as their hearts burn with divine love’s possibility. *He was dead, and now he is alive.* Into the chaos of life and death, Jesus enters and stands among them. The first words Jesus speaks, in the verses just before the assigned reading, are “Peace be with you.”

Then he asks for sustenance. The moment leaves the disciples in disbelief and wonder, just as it leaves Jesus’ fingers greasy from fish. The disciples are learning how to straddle the “what if” and the “what now” with the Lord himself. They are learning how to practice resurrection.

Once I found myself on the phone with a congregant who was in distress. What began as a lucid conversation soon turned dire. My call to him led to another to 911, to intervention by paramedics, and to his unconscious journey toward death. Being with him in the emergency room and then the intensive care unit left me asking the question, “What if I had not called?”

To sit with his family as the reality of his death drew near was to navigate the space between the “what if” of doubt and the “what now” of faith. It was a practice of that faith, a time of trusting in the resurrection.

After this man was hospitalized and before his death, I attended a clergy breakfast with a visiting scholar who is a mentor of mine. His academic work prophetically frames the promises of God in Christ Jesus and elicits a call for prophetic ministry. His challenge for ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness that is counter to the dominant culture—and to remember that the God who summons us is the God who goes with us. God is God in both the “what if” and the “what now.”

After the breakfast, I was headed back to the ICU. To my mentor’s simple inquiry—How were things going in ministry?—I responded by begging him: “Give me one word to say to this man whom I love, who is dying. Help me know what to say to his family.”

“In sync,” he replied.

“NSYNC?” I spit back. “That’s an outdated boy band from Florida, not a word for a dying man or his family. And, by the way, ‘in sync’ is two words.”

He smiled and said, “Testify to the truth. All is in sync with God.”

And there it was, the “what now.” This Jesus thing is no myth we make up. It is the mind-opening gospel truth.

Somehow, from that upper room where disbelief and wonder swirled in those early disciples, we come to these days—made ready to practice resurrection, to pluck the unexpected fruit that hangs between the “what if” of doubt and the “what now” of faith. In life and in death, we belong to God. The future beyond suffering and death depends completely on God, and not on us—for we are in sync with God. We are in sync with Christ who ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

And so we worship the Lord of our hearts. And we return with great joy, continually trusting God’s blessings and confident of God’s presence.