

Easter morning was forty days ago.
 After many resurrection appearances,
 Jesus is beginning to feel like a permanent fixture.
 The disciples are asking questions about next steps:
 "Lord, is this the time
 when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"
 Yet his answer dampens their hope.
 "It is not for you to know the times or periods
 that the Father has set.
 "But you will receive power
 when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.
 "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
 in all Judea and Samaria,
 and to the ends of the earth."
 And before anyone can ask,
 "But what about Israel?"
 Jesus is borne aloft on a cloud.
 Can there be any doubt that the witnesses
 to the Ascension of Jesus experience trauma?
 Disappearance right before your eyes is trauma.
 Two angels apply cold compresses to their shock.
 "Jesus has been taken from you into heaven.
 "He will come back in the same way.
 "Stop gaping at the sky."
 So the disciples trudge back to Jerusalem.
 From a scene of wide-eyed amazement,
 the disciples retreat to an upstairs apartment,
 what becomes in effect
 the womb of the early church.
 "All are constantly devoting themselves to prayer."
 I think they are suffering PTSD. Out of joint.
 Depressed. Experiencing random emotions.
 Given to sudden outbursts.
 The survivors ponder long and hard
 over the few words of hope Jesus left:
 "You will receive power
 when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."
 So they realize that they are just waiting.

"Waiting is when we recall all that Christ has done,"
 notes Rev. Thomas Troeger,
 "when we become more authentically human
 and give up the illusion
 that we possess divine powers."
 How long to wait?
 What to do in the meantime?
 Waiting can make us better persons
 but only if we can accept the fact that
 we're never in complete control of our lives.
 Waiting, say, for electric power to come on,
 we're in a liminal state.
 There was a television series
 called The Twilight Zone.
 The Twilight Zone is both a place
 and not-a-place at the same time, doubly liminal.
 In the Twilight Zone, rules are changed,
 or perhaps are non-existent.
 Liminal means "at a threshold."
 Twilight is liminal,
 a threshold between day and night.
 From past experiences with outages,
 we can assume that we will have power again,
 at some point.
 That's why we perceive power outage
 as only a threshold and not a permanent state.
 Though one senses a need to resolve the situation,
 liminality requires tolerance for ambiguity.
 For the disciples, this is a time for trial and error.
 They are forced to find new solutions.
 They have lost the presence that energized them.
 They have no experience of their power source
 vanishing into the ether.
 They don't assume anything will return to normal.
 Everything they counted on vanished in a whoosh.
 Like dazed survivors of a tornado,
 the disciples grope for shards of the life that was.

In the liminal place
 between memory and promise,
 they have no structure, no direction, no power.
 At least the disciples are together in their loss.
 There is a unity in their despair.
 Isolated through a common grief,
 the disciples try to picture what Jesus would do.
 What persists is the memory of Jesus in prayer.
 Could they pray to God in that intimate way?
 Maybe.
 Putting Humpty Dumpty together again for readers,
 the text identifies the eleven, by name.
 Praying perhaps starts with a few individuals.
 Then they begin to partner in prayer –
 Peter with John and James,
 Philip with Thomas,
 Bartholomew with Matthew.
 Gradually, they partner in prayer with the women.
 I rather imagine that the substance of their prayers
 is "Oh, Jesus, our friend, come back down to us."
 These hardy survivors have to look at one another
 in a new way – as resources, not just survivors.
 A feeling of family needs to emerge,
 replacing some of the sense of loss.
 Impatience will give way
 to accepting God's control.
 Even before the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost,
 the disciples are the church in formation.
 Through prayer a team of ragtags
 from the margins of society ready themselves
 to change not only their nation, but the world.
 The nuclear church begins
 with prayer as the catalyst.
 In its prayerful waiting,
 poised between Easter and Pentecost,
 the Christian community
 emulates the prayerful posture of Jesus
 when he lived among them.

There are no accounts in any of the four Gospels
 of the disciples praying,
 only this scene in Acts. ■
 "I am a failure at prayer,"
 admits Barbara Brown Taylor.
 "When people ask me about my prayer life,
 I feel like a bulimic asked about her favorite dish.
 "I'd rather show someone my checkbook stubs
 than talk about my prayer life."
 Coming from one of America's favorite preachers,
 that's a startling admission.
 But also comforting.
 Because at some point in our lives –
 maybe for most of our lives –
 any one of us can feel like a prayer failure.
 The obvious sign of failure, of course,
 is getting no answer, at least not right away.
 Instant gratification is our lifestyle.
 We'd rather get a No answer, than no answer.
 Resistance to praying takes other forms.
 Who am I to tell God what to do?
 What if I pray for the wrong thing?
 And doesn't God get a lot of conflicting prayers?
 For every child who prays for a pony,
 there's a parent praying for a pox on ponies.
 According to prayer-warriors,
 the way to overcome resistance to prayer
 is to heed Nike's slogan: Just Do It.
 Benedictines pray together,
 at least four times a day.
 Whatever they're doing, at the sound of a bell
 they stop and assemble for prayer.
 Barbara Brown Taylor witnessed this:
 "Prayer was their job, and they took it seriously.
 "They prayed like men who were shoveling coal
 into the basement furnace of some great edifice.
 "They did not seem to care whether anyone upstairs
 knew who they were or what they were doing.

“Their job was to keep the fire going so that people stayed warm.”

This brings up the utter impracticality of praying. Why pray, if an urgent situation calls for action? Countering this is the wisdom that when the need to act is urgent, more time ought to be spent in prayer, not less. Even emergency-room surgeons are learning that. What Persists Is Prayer.

A hospital chaplain, accustomed to trauma, confesses that families with whom he ministers, even families who are nominally religious, find it hard to trust in God in tough circumstances; indeed, even to take seriously the existence of God. Christ’s heavenly levitation is irrelevant to them. “If I spend too much time gazing at the sky,” the chaplain explains, “I’m criticized for being other-worldly.”

Listen, O skeptics of divine communication everywhere: It’s not about you, it’s about God. God seeks a personal relationship with you. The only way that’s going to happen is if you stop thinking about yourselves and sense God reaching out to you. That, to my notion, constitutes prayer: Sensing God reaching out. Some people describe it as placing our *selves* in the presence of God, or put another way, being present to God in our broken selves. “When we find ourselves at the in-between times, wondering when we will be restored, we must persist in prayer,” adds Dr. Joretta Marshall, professor of pastoral theology. Prayer, both personal and communal, Marshall writes,

is a witness to the Christ who lives with us in between the times of struggle.

Kathleen Norris, in her book, *Amazing Grace*, describes prayer as an accident of attentiveness to God.

She writes, “I sometimes think of prayer as a certain quality of attention that comes upon me when I’m busy doing something else.”

Placing yourself in the presence of God is active, not passive.

It takes energy and willpower – sometimes scarce commodities – to set all else aside and be present to God.

The disciples rediscover prayer during a liminal stage, when they aren’t distracted. Through prayer, they become apostles, sent on a mission into the world, a mission beyond themselves.

Christians have ever been in a liminal stage, waiting to be restored to Christ, all the while living in the Kingdom he inaugurated. Nothing should distract us from prayer – not the news, not the economy, not our surroundings, not our physical condition, not our lack of faith.

The first component of the PC(USA) constitution is the Book of Confessions, most of which we share with other denominations. In a few moments, we will recite together a portion of the newest confession, the *Belhar* written in 1986.

The confessions have quite a bit to say about prayer. “Why is prayer necessary?” asks the Heidelberg, an early catechism of the Reformed movement.

The answer is a stern warning:

“Because prayer is the chief part of the gratitude which God requires of us – and because God will give grace

and the Holy Spirit only to those who sincerely beseech God in prayer without ceasing, and who thank God for these gifts."

Clearly, the early Reformers placed central value on the practice of prayer, a lot of it.

A more contemporary Confession, from the 1980s, The Brief Statement of Faith, commends prayer: "In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing."

As part of the second section of the Book of Order, after Form of Government, is the Directory for Worship, completely new in 2016.

Speaking to the church universal, the Directory for Worship states, "Whenever and wherever we gather in Jesus' name, we join the praise and prayer of the people of God in every time and place."

The Directory goes on to describe prayer as "the primary way in which we participate in worship."

Prayer in the context of worship may be spoken, or silent, or enacted in physical ways, such as singing.

In fact, the singing of prayers (we call them hymns) is a vital and ancient form of prayer.

"Singing engages the whole person, and helps to unite the body of Christ in worship."

Besides, after we leave worship, what persists is often the words and melody of sung prayer.

Personal life and public worship are connected.

In a later section on Christian living, the Directory commends prayer as "a way of opening ourselves to God, who desires communication and communion with us."

In a tribute to the importance of personal piety, the Directory notes that a pattern of daily prayer "connects the believer

with the worship of ancient Israel, centuries of Christian tradition, and Jesus' own practices."

"Daily prayer serves as a bridge between public worship and personal affairs, helping us to live out our faith each day." To that end, the Directory recommends daily church services of prayer, perhaps at appointed hours every day or during holy seasons, such as we practice during Advent and Holy Week.

CONCLUSION

Next week we will celebrate the Holy Spirit's coming upon the believers at Pentecost.

We will observe the Eucharist, opening with The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving: "Lift up your hearts . . . we lift them up to the Lord."

We are not asking Jesus to come down to our level. In the Great Prayer, we are asking the Holy Spirit to lift us up to Jesus' level.

Hearing today of the Ascension of the Lord, my guess is that most of us,

like those first apostles,

are praying for Jesus to come down to us.

Help us, here and now.

We are traumatized . . .

We are waiting . . .

We are failing.

Trauma brings about a sense of great loss.

What Persists Is Prayer. Lift up your hearts.

Loss brings about a liminal state of waiting.

What Persists Is Prayer. Lift up your hearts.

Waiting raises nagging questions of failure.

What Persists Is Prayer. Lift up your hearts.

Lift them up to the Lord.

May it be so, for now and forever.

Amen.