

Ascension/Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 16, 2021
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

Forty days after his resurrection, the disciples were on their own.

The disciples didn't know what was coming ten days later. They dedicated the last three years of their lives to Jesus. Think about Peter, who left his home and his wife to follow him. Watching Jesus ascend to heaven was the end of their time with him and the beginning of an indefinite time of uncertainty.

We've all endured times of uncertainty. Sometimes it was short, such as the time leading up to a big test when we were kids. We've probably experienced long periods of uncertainty, such as getting a cancer diagnosis, either our own or of someone we love. Maybe it was following a divorce or the death of a spouse. Or maybe facing sudden unemployment in a down economy. Or maybe this past year with Covid.

We like certainty. Having certainty allows us instinctively to adjust as circumstances change, which helps us survive. Consequently, uncertainty increases our anxiety. We create scenarios in our heads or jump to conclusions, which may have no grounding in any reality. We overestimate threats and underestimate our ability to handle them. Studies found that we are calmer when we anticipate pain than anticipating uncertainty.¹

Jesus gave the disciples a modicum of certainty. Jesus had the answers to the rhetorical dueling he did with the authorities. Jesus had the power to heal the sick and the lame people they met. Jesus had the wisdom to open God's law to people in ways that changed their perception of their world. With him gone, how would they do it?

¹ Robinson, Bryan E. *The Psychology of Uncertainty*. **Psychology Today**. March 17, 2020.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-right-mindset/202003/the-psychology-uncertainty>

We would be paralyzed living in constant uncertainty. We like control and need control. I wonder, though, if control is an illusion. True, we have a high degree of certainty that we'll eat lunch sometime after this service. We have a high degree of certainty that we will wake up in our beds tomorrow and go about our Monday activities. Control increases our faith in our desired outcomes while at the same time minimizes potential adversity.

Yet, certainty can be shattered in an instant. A freak accident. An unexpected diagnosis. Suddenly our world changes. What do we do?

As Christians, we turn to God. We pray. We rationalize saying, "God has a plan." We draw comfort knowing that whatever uncertainty we face, we're not alone. The psalmist (45:1-3, 10a) wrote,

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Be still, and know that I am God,

All this is good, when we have faith in God, not ourselves. We can become complacent, though, when things are going well. We think, "God's got my back." That thinking can put God in our back pocket, which is not entirely a bad thing. Except, complacency can lead us in uncertain situations to suppress our feelings of vulnerability. Consequently, our decisions and actions can lead to unintended outcomes.

We don't typically think of uncertainty in our relationship with God. We've been taught that building our lives with God as our foundation makes for more stability than building on sand. We've been taught that God is our strength and shield. Implicitly, though, these teachings point to God as shelter in life's storms.

Our faith gives us strength and courage in times of uncertainty. We can withstand uncertainty because we're not alone. Faith gives us resources to live with uncertainty. They might be prayer, journaling, or meditation. Faith gives us patience. Faith gives us hope.

When someone asks why we believe in God, how often do we say, "My faith gets me through periods of uncertainty?" Though that reason doesn't immediately come to mind, we should express it more frequently.

When we allow ourselves to sit in uncertainty, we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. When they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6b) He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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." (1:7-8)

When we're uncertain, let's not rush to resolution. Pray. Write. Meditate. Have patience. When we let our vulnerability leave our door ajar for the Holy Spirit, who knows what can happen.