



Roanoke, Virginia

January 26, 2020

Mission Build Kick-Off Sunday

“Why Do You Look Up?”

Acts 1:6-11

Dr. George C. Anderson and Rev. Rachel C. Thompson

George:

Our passage this morning describes Jesus having a final word with his disciples before being lifted from their sight.

When Rev. Thompson reads the passage, have in mind what the disciples who are with Jesus on the mountaintop have been through. They have trusted Jesus to be their guide to better know and love God. Because they were convinced Jesus was the messiah who would gather and lead a restored people of God—a new Israel—they followed Jesus in and out of Galilee and Samaria, and even into Jerusalem when it was scary to do so.

There, it went wrong, *horribly* wrong. An arrest on false charges led quickly to a politically expedient crucifixion... and that was it, hopes dashed, the movement ended. An arc that began when he called them to follow ended when he died.

Then, only three days later, having had their lives turned-on-end, their lives were turned-inside-out. The grave was found empty. Then, Jesus stood before them, alive, fresh wounds in his hands and side.

Still, their world keeps shifting. Jesus tells them he will leave them again in body, though not in Spirit. So, about to be left behind *again*, they carefully listen to what Jesus tells them before he goes.

Let us listen carefully. Listen with the ears of disciples then and disciples today.



Rachel:

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

George:

Rachel and I offer this sermon together because we want to speak to something in which we are both heavily invested. We will go back and forth as speakers, and back and forth between the disciples gathered on Mt. Olivet and the Second Presbyterian church community gathered for worship on Mountain Ave.

Rachel:

We begin with the risen Jesus and his friends. They’re standing on Mt. Olivet, which, just to give you a sense, is about a thousand feet higher than Mill Mountain, not quite as high as McAfee Knob. So, it would take only a couple of hours for the disciples to climb, but it is a climb that brings amazing perspective. From this height it’s easy to look out over the city of Jerusalem and well into Israel, so it makes sense that the disciples’ imagination reaches only what they can see. They ask, “[Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?](#)”

George:

Perhaps their question sounds parochial, but I understand. Generally, my focus is on where I live and work; my family beginning with Millie and the girls, and certainly the local congregation I have been called to serve. It’s what I can see. The disciples see Israel, and I see Second Presbyterian Church and Roanoke, VA.

When I first arrived at what was already a strong church, I worked with the session and congregation to craft a *Long-Range Plan*. The work was worth it. This plan did not sit on a shelf. It led to DISCIPLE Bible study, Evening Bible School, a church retreat, expanded lectures, Picnic Sunday in the country... (the list is too long to keep going). Now we added outreach programs, too, like Family Promise, serving Highland Park Elementary, a prison visitation ministry, mission trips to the Dominican Republic... we increased our Outreach Budget. But the plan was clear. Our *first* priority was on building the life and ministry of this family of faith so that we can be the



strongest possible faith community and make a real difference in the lives of those who walk in these doors and become a part of our life together.

Rachel:

And that was good. The depth of connection, study, and energy present here in this church is a strong witness to the good but difficult news that through Jesus, we all belong to each other in God's family. I'm so grateful for the ways that the programs of this church have provided a structure that makes exciting new ministry possible.

For example, right now there are kids in our youth group who have never been part of a church before. That's a huge opportunity. And it's happened in large part because this congregation has intentionally prioritized programs for Christian education and has intentionally prioritized the youth and young adults in our community. I am so grateful for the work that began long before I got here. The work that you all did to build up this family of faith was good.

George:

In the midst of that good work, we had to face a challenge. We had facilities that were not adequate for our expanded life and ministry, and the cost of maintenance was too much of a drag on the budget. After years of study we came up with a plan for construction and renovation. But then came the 2008 recession. The timing seemed terrible, but in 2009 we launched into a 5.5 million-dollar capital campaign. And somehow, during a recession, we managed not only to maintain our level of giving to missions but, by God's grace and your generosity, we transformed our facilities as a church home.

Rachel:

And *that* was good, too. I've walked into a lot of church buildings in my life and I can tell you—it is clear to me from the welcoming space of Kirk Hall to the well-equipped classrooms, to the Intersection youth house across the street that this church takes seriously the formation that happens within these walls.

But it's funny, even though George says the #1 priority of that first Long-Range Plan was on building the congregation, when I got here, I found a church that also had a heart for missions, for reaching God's family beyond these walls. One of my assignments is to serve as the staff liaison for the *Service and Outreach Committee*, and as I looked over our benevolence budget and heard stories from countless individuals, it became clear that what had happened over time was that having strong connections within the church had led to equally strong connections and partnerships beyond the walls of the church.



George:

Here is what we said about mission outreach in that first plan—and it is something that almost every church says, but not every church can achieve: We hoped, we believed, that a time would come when we would leverage our strength as a church to make a dramatic jump in making a difference in the world beyond our membership. We want to be a strong family of faith, but not as an end in itself. Our purpose is to make a witness to Roanoke and beyond of God’s healing, saving, reconciling grace.

We’ve been getting there. During my two decade plus ministry, we have been able to take on mission challenges at what I would call *a reasonable pace*. I would even say, *a **planned** pace*. One year we began a new focus on at-risk families, another year on at-risk children, another year on prisoners and their families, and so on.

But then last year, in 2019, we lost control of timing. Not one-by-one, but all-at-once, four of our most significant mission partners—four of the ministries with which for years we have been closely tied—came to us to say they needed significant support from us to take a major step forward.

Rachel:

To be clear, not a single one of these mission partners came to us in panic or in crisis. Just like what happened here, each of their challenges came because of successful ministry that had grown beyond what their facilities could handle, ministry that would be held back without some major construction or renovation.

George:

I honestly can’t remember the order in which they came to us, so we’ll start with the ministries serving areas we could see if standing beneath the star on top of Mill Mountain. The first is *Family Promise*.

Rachel:

Family Promise is a ministry that houses families in crisis and in danger of homelessness. Week by week, these families—mostly single moms with children—are given shelter in church facilities like ours. In the midst of financial crisis, Family Promise steps in to help keep families together and give these children stability and shelter. Their success rate is incredible—90 percent of Family Promise participants move into permanent housing.

Our church is blessed with the Alpha Omega house facility across the street that the session has designated for mission, particularly Family Promise. It’s a blessing to have the AO house, but it’s also a responsibility. In its current disrepair, the house doesn’t represent the hospitality we feel a church needs to show to those Jesus most wants us to serve. We also want to keep the house’s maintenance off the church budget to direct most of your giving to ministry. Looking forward, we



want to provide a house that is safer, welcoming, and more hospitable, but the current space is holding us back. The Fire Marshal, by the way, agrees with us.

That's one. Here's two.

The *Presbyterian Community Center* is a hub of resources, support and hope in Southeast Roanoke. We have been partners in mission since its founding over five decades ago. The work the PCC does is transformative, and nowhere is this more evident than their Pathways program. Pathways provides support for students and their families all the way through high school, and for the past decade students in their program have a 100% high school graduation rate. That's impressive! The program is growing, and the only thing holding them back from reaching more families is that they just don't have sufficient space. The director and board members of the PCC have shared that major funds are needed to either renovate or replace their facilities on Jamison Ave.

George:

I think you can see it coming. We also were approached by two other mission partners who do their work beyond what can be seen from the top of Mill Mountain. I'll voice something that many of us are tempted to say. Our church is in Roanoke, VA and **we need to serve where we are planted**. Our question of Jesus is [“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom in Roanoke; restore the lives of Roanoke families in crisis and the southeast Roanoke community?”](#)

Rachel:

Jesus answers them. [“Yes, in Jerusalem. But also Judea, which is the southern half of Israel. Also Samaria, which is on the other side of Israel's border. And also to the ends of the earth.”](#)

Jesus is telling the disciples that to be his body in the world, their vision and heart has to go where his vision and heart goes. It has to go beyond those who we know, those we love, those who live where we live and those who are just like us or on our side. Our calling is to be about what Jesus was about, and he was about the healing and reconciliation of the whole world. The disciples may have wanted control over the timing. They may have wanted to say, [“Jews first, Gentiles later/ Us first, them later/ Here now, over there later.”](#) But let's be honest. “Later,” so easily becomes “never.”

Jesus says, [“When I leave, walk down the mountain and spread the Gospel where you live. Absolutely serve your people. But you're my body, so serve *my* people, and that means those who live where you can see, and those who live beyond.”](#)

George:

So, we listened to God's call and looked beyond our sight. Around the same time Family Promise and the PCC approached us, Ted Feinour invited me to lunch. Ted is a member of this



church and a member of the board of Union Presbyterian Seminary. Our church has strong ties to Union because they have trained the vast majority of the ministers who have preached from this pulpit including Dr. Hollingsworth, Dr. Klein, Rev. Link and myself. We've hosted seminary interns from Union, and two of our members are currently students at Union. For the past thirteen years, our church and Union have sponsored the *Trent Symposium for Newly Ordained Ministers*. Our relationship goes way back.

But the center of that relationship isn't financial—the center of that relationship is the fact that training ministers is a huge priority for this congregation. We know that our world needs to hear from voices that have been shaped by good theology and who can build a healthy community of faith. The church needs leaders, and we want to do our part to help raise them up.

So does Union. But they need more space. Ted let me know that the seminary needs to open a new Leadership Institute Center primarily to do what we are so invested in doing: and that is nurturing pastors already ordained. And as a powerful and personal sign of our long partnership with them, they plan to name the new Leadership facility in honor of our Pastor Emeritus, Dr. William R. Klein.

And, then there is the final mission partner who came to us. We've heard for years about what Solid Rock International is trying to accomplish, and that is build a new clinic in San Juan de la Maguana.

In less than a month, we will send our 18th Medical Mission team to the Dominican Republic to serve in the clinic they want to replace. The clinic is small and sits in a flood plain. I've been there once when the facility was flooded; and once the water rose to 2/3rds of the clinic's height. So, you can see why they need to move out of the flood plain.

We are so connected to this mission that we have several members who serve, or have served, on its board, and one member, Ken Potter, works on the Solid Rock staff.

Ken came to us to tell us that the new clinic—really a hospital—has been mostly constructed. But the project still needs a million and a half dollars to push it to completion. They need our help.

Rachel:

I want to talk just a bit more about *why* we have been so deeply connected to these four organizations for so long. Part of it is financial—of the congregations who support these four groups, our church has been at the top of the list or among the top few for a long time. They count on us. But it's more than that.

I'm about to ask some of you to stand up if you're able. Will you stand, and stay standing, if you've ever gone on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic. Now will you stand if you've ever done something to help host families with Family Promise—if you've spent the night or made a meal or cleaned up the AO house. And will you stand if you have ever volunteered at the Presbyterian Community Center, or brought food for Hunger Busters, or helped with Hunger Busters delivery. I won't ask you to stand if you've ever been involved with Union Presbyterian Seminary, because given how many Union educated ministers we've had, basically the whole



church would have to be on their feet. But you can see just by looking around this sanctuary that these organizations aren't separate from us, out there somewhere. These are our people.

George:

It was overwhelming at first to have all four approach us at the same time. ([Who were we going to refuse to help?](#)) But when the ministers, Finance Committee, treasurers and session thought about it, we realized that because they are our people, *their* challenges are *our* challenges, *their* causes are *our* causes. These are our people and our causes. What they are seeking to do—help at-risk families in Roanoke, transform the Southeast Neighborhood, nurture ministers for the sake of the larger church, and be a part of ministering to the poorest of the poor in San Juan—is what we have been about for a long, long time.

And so, after study and prayer, we decided to launch a *Mission Build Campaign* hoping through pledges and gifts to raise over the next three years 1.6 million dollars.

I am now convinced that God has been leading this congregation to this place for years. Churches often talk about “Someday” when it comes to doing something dramatic to make a difference in the world. We have done it before and it's time to do it again. Our someday is today. It is for such a moment that I went into ministry. It is part of the reason why this church was formed, and why ministers have preached, elders organized and members gave their money. A moment we have regularly prayed for (“[Make us your servants in the world](#)”) has arrived in a unique way. We *are* a strong congregation with a vibrant life and now we have the opportunity to do something that will have major ripple effects of life transformation that will continue for generations. As someone who has served here since 1998, it seems that we have arrived at this point.

Rachel:

George talks about it like we've arrived. And I get that. I am grateful for the history that has led us to this point. I so deeply appreciate the work it took to get us here. But I know George understands where I'm coming from when I say that to me it's not just about the arc of history that brought us to this moment. The real joy for me is when I look forward. From my view, the arc points forward.

Those disciples on the mountaintop had a long history with Jesus, but when he ascended, he left them as a new church with a future. The whole history of the Jesus movement stretched out in front of them. And we have a future, too, a future of following the risen Jesus wherever his Spirit leads: here at home in Roanoke, in our nation, and in our world.

For those who are new to the church, for those who have been here forever—this is our opportunity to say that we didn't join this church—this Jesus movement—to mess around. We're serious about being what this church was created and has been striving to be: a church of Jesus Christ that proclaims the Gospel of justice, compassion and reconciliation.



George:

After Jesus was physically gone, angels asked the disciples, “Why are you looking up?” If you want to find Jesus, go look where he said his Spirit would meet you: in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Rachel:

So let’s go—lets go to the streets of Roanoke, to the school in Richmond that serves the nation and the church, to the clinic in the Dominican Republic and to the ends of the earth. Let’s go. That’s where we’ll find Jesus.

