

Sermon Title: Picking Up the Ball

Text: Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-14

By: Rev. Terry Carty

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Place: Kingston Springs United Methodist Church

Season: Seventh Sunday of Easter; Ascension Sunday

Main Point: We, the Church, are left to pick up the ball when Jesus leaves.

My most vivid memory of Rev. Stuart Nunnally is summarized by “well phooey!” Stuart and I first met when we were both assigned by the Bishop to serve at Gallatin First UMC. Stuart was the Senior Minister and I was a seminary student Associate Minister.

Those three years that we served together were really learning years of me. I learned to pray out loud, how to pick up my robe when going up stairs, how to balance never-ending church work with never-ending school work and a family that missed their daddy, and how to maintain poise while thinking on my feet.

Stuart was a good preacher. He prided himself on being relevant and using sermon illustrations that were memorable - almost like object lessons are to children’s sermons. I hope that he would feel honored that I am using him as a sermon illustration today. Stuart passed away last Sunday.

It was a Sunday in the early part of summer when Stuart used the sermon to try to teach that congregation how to respond to something that they agreed with. It was an “old First Church” that did not clap nor did they speak unless it was in the bulletin to do so. Stuart used great illustrations from scripture about how God wants us to lift our praises and he talked about how his African-American colleagues are inspired to preach with more conviction when the congregation punctuates the sermon with “amens.”

At the end of the sermon he closed by calling the congregation to be an amen congregation and especially when the preacher says “amen” they should respond with “amen.” The sermon ended and he offered a brief prayer to close it like I often do. At the end of the prayer he said an enthusiastic “AMEN!” The congregation was silent. Stuart waited for it, but not an amen was heard. He looked up, looked around, gripped the pulpit and said “Well, PHOOEY!” Then he grabbed his Bible and walked out of the room.

I sat there in my Associate Minister chair. I looked to see if he was coming back but it became obvious that he was not. So I warily got up and approached the pulpit to announce the next hymn. Stuart did not return and I finished the service.

After the service that day there was the new member luncheon that included an orientation time. Stuart presided and it was as if nothing had happened. But when it came my time to tell the new members what my job was at the church I said, “I am the Associate Minister. I am the one who picks up the ball when the Senior Minister walks out in the middle of the worship service!”



That is what today's scripture passages are about today. What happens when the main guy leaves suddenly. Who picks up the ball?

We read the end of the Gospel of Luke and the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. Both written by the same author, the one ends with the ascension of Christ and the second begins with the ascension of Christ. The story of the ascension builds a bridge between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of apostles - both enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The traditional seven last words from the cross are not Jesus' last words on this earth. The words are to be found in these passages, and they give the church some definitive guidance. As Jesus prepared to leave those who were devoted to him, he offered three things they would need: a **promise**, a **purpose**, and a **preparation**. We have those same things today.



We have a promise: the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told them that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. A disciple can expect to receive power when the promised Holy Spirit arrives. Yes, the Holy Spirit is an Advocate and Comforter, but it also brings power.

Today disempowered people across the world are struggling to be empowered - the middle east is ablaze with the Arab Spring, the USA has tea-baggers and blue dogs. Jesus' last words to those who would become known as Christians was that they could count on getting power.



We have a purpose: to be Witnesses. When the power comes it will be with a specific purpose. Jesus said 'you will receive power to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

Holy Spirit power is not for the purpose of building secular kingdoms, but it is for witnessing to others about the reign of God. The book of Acts is structured that way. We see the disciples first witnessing where they were - Jerusalem. Then they moved out to all of Judea and Samaria, then to the ends of the earth. Today we are being empowered to share the Christian faith with the whole world - beginning with where we are now.

As the disciples heard these last words, Jesus ascended into heaven leaving them to pick up the ball. They just stood there until the angels said 'get going - you know what to do.'



We have a means of preparation: prayer. The remaining disciples, the women, Jesus' mother and brothers were constantly devoting themselves to prayer and going to the temple. They talked to God.



Stuart knew that I was ready to pick up the ball when he walked out of that worship service. He had been teaching me and working with me and coaching me. Jesus knew the disciples were equipped to rescue their world from idol worship and from paganism.

Today money, power and self indulgence set the standards for status. We are a culture of self-made persons. Often we are looked down upon when we look to God for guidance. It is seen as a sign of weakness or empty of power. We live in a dysfunctional pagan world.

In our day, the church is again being called to rescue people out of paganism. For this God sends the promised Holy Spirit for comfort, guidance and power. Be prepared. Spend time in prayer and discernment this week so you will understand your calling. It's time to pick up the ball and go into the world to tell people they can follow Christ.