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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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“Taking a Head Count”
Acts 1:6-14

Read the scripture online: NSRV, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=205321038>

The writers of the bible were masters of understatement. They often described the most miraculous events in only a few words. Moses' parting of the Red Sea is described in just one verse (Exodus 14:21). Luke's description of the women discovering an empty tomb on Easter morning is captured in just two verses (Luke 24:2-3). But one of the understated verses that I particularly love is verse 12 in today's reading from Acts: *Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.*

Why is this verse so special? Think about it for a moment. The disciples had just endured the terrible events of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. Then came Easter, with its resurrection appearances that turned their entire world upside-down. The dead now live; the power and kingdom of God were now revealed for all people. Next came a time in which the resurrected Christ taught them, filling in the blanks in the unfolding gospel story. The disciples came to understand that Jesus' life was not about restoring some ancient realm of King David; his life was about restoring all people, the world over, in their relationship with God and with one another. Finally, Jesus was gone; ascended out of sight, taken away physically from their midst.

Can you imagine the swirl of emotions stirring in the disciples when it became clear that Christ was now gone? That they were the ones responsible for telling this story, for incarnating this gospel and living this good news as a witness for all the world? To all of you parents: Remember the fear and trepidation you felt when the nurse handed you your first, newborn son or daughter and you drove home ever so carefully and placed the child in a squeaky new crib and said to yourself, "Oh my God, I don't know how to care for a tiny, helpless, little baby!" With Jesus' ascension, it was as if each disciple had been handed a precious, fragile child: the gospel of One who lived and died and was raised and ascended and will come again. And, now they were fully responsible for its care and upbringing. That's why there are a lot of emotions packed into that understated verse from Acts 1, when we're told the disciples took their experiences and this gospel gift and returned back to the crowded streets of Jerusalem.

Luckily they didn't have to go very far. "A Sabbath's day journey" refers to the distance you could legally travel on a Sabbath, about half a mile. Notice that the disciples didn't go their separate ways. They didn't give each other a final hug or handshake and wander off to their individual homes to see what was for dinner. They stayed together; notice that. They stayed together and went to the familiar surroundings of the upper room. Then they did several sensible, faithful things, the first of which was to take a head count.



I remember lots of head counts from my elementary school days: lining up and counting off to make sure everyone was ready to move from one classroom to another. Or on field trips, being told to find a buddy, hold hands and let the teachers count heads to make sure everyone was present. One, two, three; the gentle tap on the head or shoulder as you boarded the bus for a field trip. Head counts are based on the concept of making sure no one is left behind. The world would be a better place if we truly lived out that philosophy in our daily lives.

The disciples descended the Mount of Olives, made their way to the Upper Room and then did a head count: the fishermen brothers Peter and Andrew, James and John, check; the tax collector, Matthew; the revolutionary Simon the Zealot, check, check; the other men, check; the other women, check, exclamation point! Christianity was never an all-male club. As the Apostle Paul says, In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; all of you are one in Christ Jesus; check. That's one important feature of a head count: to make sure everyone's included and accounted for before anything else takes place.

After they counted heads, the group prayed. They didn't immediately elect officers or decide who among them was in charge. The group did not form a committee or prepare a financial statement or approve the minutes from their last Upper Room gathering. They prayed. They recognized that the One who had entrusted the gospel to them was still in relationship with them, so they prayed to this One, God made known in Christ, active through the Holy Spirit, for the grace to understand what should come next.

And so what did come next? After they did their head count and finished praying, they opened their eyes and looked around and knew that one was missing from their group. Judas Iscariot had betrayed Jesus and then sadly taken his own life. There was a wound – a hole – in their common body, an empty chair at their table of Christian fellowship. Their first act was to heal that wound. So they prayed some more and eventually chose Matthias to be added into the core group of disciples.

People are quick to say that the church has lost its relevance today. People call us hypocrites, judgmental, naïve, holier-than-thou. On one hand, to argue that we're *not* hypocritical (even though we all sin and stumble and do bad things) only proves their point. On the other hand, to admit that we are flawed and imperfect for some people simply calls into question the value of the whole Christian institution. That's why in today's skeptical age, the understated example of the early church is *still* our best guide: 1) The church is a place where we take head counts. We look around to see, as best as we can, that no one is left behind or pushed to the margins. 2) The church is a place where we pray. We bring God into the conversation, keeping Christ ever beside us, and seek to follow where the Spirit blows us. 3) And, the church is a place where our only real job is to heal; to notice the wounds, to see the pain and suffering, and work for healing, for reconciliation. That's really it. That's our calling.



You may say to yourself, "I'm not rich or powerful or famous; what can I do?" You can follow Christ and be a healer. There is no more important work in the world today than to work for healing, at whatever level, and in whatever situation God has placed you.

So remember: Take a head count. Pray. And then open your eyes and see how your presence and God's grace can bring healing to others.

AMEN

