

It's hard to believe that today, Ascension Sunday, marks the end of “The Great Forty Days” of the Easter season. It seems we've missed an entire season of celebrating the most important reason of our Christian faith, Christ's resurrection. It almost feels as if the Lenten season of hope and spiritual preparation just took over the rest of our Christian calendar. True enough, while the paraments at Bethel have changed to glorious and celebratory white, the cloth that hangs from the pulpit and lectern and lie waiting to be changed on the altar are still penitent purple at Monticello. What you may consider as a nod to my lackadaisicalness, I see it as an important visual reminder of the times we have been living in. Monticello's empty sanctuary unconsciously, and yet perhaps consciously, is still observing a period of hopeful preparation and self-reflection for what Bethel's sanctuary already confirms: We are people of the Resurrection! Our hope is not in vain, because we know the truth: Christ is risen! Christ walks alongside us! God brings renewal from the darkest of times!

It should be clear to us all by now that we are in such times of darkness. General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History of the UMC, Rev. Alfred T. Day III sets us up for another celebration today, Heritage Sunday, saying, “we are facing a pandemic of a magnitude rarely witnessed in human history. Emotions are wide-ranging as we face misinformation, confusion, illness, separation, quarantines, and even death.” “Inevitably”, he states, “this may lead us to question the role of God and the Church.” But if anything is true for us on this “coincidental” trifecta of celebratory observances (Ascension/Heritage/Memorial Sunday), it is for us to not forget who we are, how far we've come, and those who endured the hard-fought battles for freedom in having today's celebrations to observe.

Historically, we are patriots, as well as rebels. We are Methodists, as well as Christians. Therefore, we are people who are nothing more than ardent, and nothing less than resilient.

Today, we look back through the lens of history and find not misery or despair through life's trials of war and depredation, but we find hope and strength for tomorrow, because by God's grace we are here right now. Even through the world's faithlessness yesterday, by God's grace we are still here.

If your church's four walls could talk with one another about the history they'd witnessed, and if we could sit and listen in on their history lesson, what would it reminisce? Would it recollect their origins? Would Monticello remember their given first name, Monticello Methodist Episcopal Church South, when it was born rebellious over the debate of slavery? Would it remember the time during the War between the States when a division of Sherman's Army came through Monticello burning and looting many of the plantations and homes but for some reason, known only to God, Monticello Methodist Episcopal Church, South was not harmed? Would it remember its humble beginnings around 1800 as a building of logs, not much bigger than a log cabin, and all the many renovations and improvements that it has undergone over the 220 years for it to be the bastion of hope to the community it still is today?

What would Bethel recall? Would it remember its blended German Methodist beginnings in 1761 as Bethesda-Auf-Marirn on Crooked Run Creek and then later Martin's Meeting House on Brown's Bridge Road? Would it remember its merger with the Horeb community in 1840 that brought it to where it now stands? Would it remember the three rebirths, the three reconstructions it endured to restore its prominence for the community? Would it remember when it laughed at the fire that laid waste to its insides back in 2001, because the donated Winnsboro blue granite that it's constructed from was long ago formed from hot magma under the earth, which allowed it to withstand fire and remain standing today?

Would those two churches remember the names of those alive and buried who helped it become what it is today? Those patriots. Those rebels. Those ardent Methodists. Those resilient Christians, who through prayer and togetherness, endured wars on religious freedom and human freedom, persevered through natural disasters and human-made disasters, and suffered through every disease until God provided a way through death or cure.

What of the first Church? That church in which Jesus built for Peter to continue Christ’s life and ministry in the world. What would Jesus’s foundational church say to us Christians today who are suffering a “pandemic of a magnitude rarely witnessed in human history”? We, the Easter people holding onto hope and faith, who may be questioning God’s part and the Church’s part in all of this? What would Peter’s sermon be for us who are caught between these liturgical/emotional colors of purple and white this day? I think Peter would reach into his filing cabinet and dust off these familiar words he said in 64 CE, during Emperor Nero’s persecution of his fellow Christian followers in Rome.

In the face of so much tragedy and death Peter says to a hopeful and faithful church of Easter people, “Dear friends, don’t be surprised about the fiery trials that have come among you to test you. These are not strange happenings. Instead, rejoice as you share Christ’s suffering. You share his suffering now so that you may also have overwhelming joy when his glory is revealed. If you are mocked because of Christ’s name, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory—indeed, the Spirit of God—rests on you. Therefore, humble yourselves under God’s power so that he may raise you up in the last day. Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you. Be clearheaded. Keep alert. Your accuser, the devil, is on the prowl like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith. Do so in the knowledge that your fellow believers are enduring the same suffering throughout the world. After you have

suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, the one who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, empower, strengthen, and establish you. To him be power forever and always. Amen.” (1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11 CEB).

What is regarded to many Christians as the second most influential piece of writing to the Christian faith, other than the Bible, is the 15th century monk, Thomas à Kempis’, *The Imitation of Christ*. In it he says this about our human faith and suffering, “Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feast, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer for his sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many admire the miracles, but few follow him to the humiliation of the cross. Many love Jesus as long as no hardship touches them.” In other words, the monk, Thomas à Kempis, and the apostle, Peter both tell us that when we encounter a “fiery ordeal,” we are invited to “rejoice as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that [we] may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.” Therefore, cast all of your worries and cares onto God because God cares to know and hear them. As Easter people our faith and hope in Christ’s promises of resurrection and his return amid times of trouble and distress makes us a resilient people.

Recently, there was an interesting article in *The Wall Street Journal* by Elizabeth Bernstein, entitled *The Science of Prayer*. In it she says that “many people are praying now more than ever, and scientists are saying the practice may boost mental health.” My point in bringing this article up is simply to point to the fact that we as human beings are a resilient people. When we add prayer to our lives, we are even more so. But when we have something to prayer for and someone to pray to, in which our hope and faith lies in, we are an unstoppable people with power

and authority that is within us and from beyond us. Thus, as Easter people, we know that even in life’s sufferings, God is at work bringing renewal in the world and in our lives. Some of those renewals we get to experience and celebrate: rebuilt churches, revivals on the national and individual scale, and rebirths through baptisms. Other renewals, like the death of a loved one, we wait to celebrate in the Kingdom of God to come.

Therefore, we have much to celebrate on this day. Today we have a trifecta of joyous occasions. Today we celebrate Christ’s Ascension. We celebrate the promises he leaves with us before his ascension namely, the power of “the Companion”, “the Helper”, the Holy Spirit, his triumphant return, and our unity in prayer. Today we celebrate our Church’s history in Heritage Sunday. And today we honor and remember those who sacrificed their lives for these occasions we celebrate now as Easter people.

During the past 40 days (including today), your “Home Edition” bulletins have had the opening hymn, “Easter People Raise Your Voices” (UMH #304). At the opening of what would be our time together in worship this Easter season, we would get to sing the words that open the last verse, “Every day to us is Easter, with its resurrection song”. Those words remind us that as long as we make room for hope, or even the memory of the faith our tradition has had before us, in Jesus Christ, we will be able to continue to celebrate renewal every day as Easter people.