

SUN, MAY 21  
9 AM & 11 AM

Carry On!



“Carry On!”

May 21, 2023 | 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Charlie Berthoud | Luke 24:44-53

Then Jesus said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day <sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” <sup>50</sup> Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup> And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, <sup>53</sup> and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

It’s graduation season, and we are among many families celebrating graduates.

Our eldest son graduated from Washington University last week. We are very proud of him.

Graduation weekend was wonderful. One highlight was the commencement address by Sterling K. Brown, an actor known for roles in Black Panther, This Is Us, and Honk for Jesus, among many others.

Mr. Brown grew up in St. Louis and considered attending WashU, but he



wanted to explore the world, so he went to California, where he attended Stanford University, which he called “WashU of the west” to the delight of the WashU crowd.

I’ve heard a good number of graduation speeches, and most of them avoid religion. Mr. Brown did not.

He acknowledged his Christian roots, noting the importance of living a good life, a fruitful life, citing the gospel of John which says: you will know them by their fruits.

He proceeded to cite the fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

And then encouraged graduates and the rest of us to listen to, as he put it, “our intuition or the spirit of God” in order to find our way.

He did a great job talking about his own faith with authenticity while also being gracious and humble and respectful of other traditions.



A graduation is a time of leaving behind the familiar, listening for guidance, and continuing the journey.

The disciples were not “graduating” but they were definitely in a time of transition.

They needed to leave behind the familiar, listen for guidance, and continue the journey—after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

Jesus had been with them for three years, teaching them by word and deed about the good news of the kingdom of God.

He proclaimed God’s love for the world and called his followers to live with new purpose, to make God’s love present—by caring for each other, by looking out for the people who were too often forgotten, by being people of hope.

And he told them, with words and by his example, to take up the cross and follow.

Because he was a threat to the power structure of the day, he was killed by the

religious and political leaders, and after three days, he was resurrected, which we celebrated six weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, April 9.

According to the Bible, after the resurrection, continued his ministry and more explicitly empowered the disciples to take over.

One of the best examples is in John's gospel, where Jesus recommissions Peter, the one who denied Jesus, telling Peter to feed the sheep, to take care of the flock—in other words to care for people.

It's like he's saying "carry on"—keep doing what I started, caring for the sick and the outcasts, feeding the hungry, and making this world a better place.

Jesus didn't stay on earth forever. The scripture says it was forty days. Last Thursday was forty days since Easter, the day known as the Ascension, when Jesus physically departed, after promising that the Holy Spirit would come—to teach, comfort, and strengthen the disciples.

Next Sunday, fifty days after Easter, is Pentecost, the day when we remember and celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit.

So, we are right now in between the Ascension and Pentecost, and the text tells us that the disciples initially went to Jerusalem and spent all their time in the Temple, with the promise of the Spirit to be coming.

It looks to me like they realized they were in the midst of a major transition, so they needed some time to focus, listen, and prepare before really carrying on in the spirit of Jesus.

We are in a time of major transition here at church both as we emerge from Covid and as we continue to seek an Associate Pastor and a Children and Youth Ministry Coordinator.

Now is as good a time as any for us as a church to focus, listen, and prepare—to be open to God's Spirit to come anew, to give us wisdom, courage, and power.

This is why I've renewed my invitation for all of us to be grounded in scripture and prayer.

Earlier this month, I suggested we all read and ponder a verse of the Bible every day. I use the YouVersion app, and I've found those daily verses helpful.

From now through the end of June, I invite you to block out five minutes a day for prayer. Those of you who read your weekly CONNECTIONS email saw this already, along with ten suggestions for prayer.

I don't want to go through all ten of them here, but I do want to share a few:

- Pray the Lord's Prayer slowly
- Pray the words from a hymn or song
- Pray as you read or watch the news, asking for God's blessings and wisdom

Or pick up a copy of the church prayer list, which has Pentecost prayers on it. These prayers essentially open us to the Holy Spirit to come and give us wisdom, courage, and strength.

Usually, we offer Pentecost prayers on the day of Pentecost, but this year, let's pray before Pentecost to be ready and open for next Sunday.

Like the disciples who were in the temple praising and praying, we can prepare ourselves for the Spirit to come and teach us and comfort us and lead us forward.

While prayer is about lifting up our concerns to God, it's even more about opening up ourselves to be changed and strengthened by God. Prayer is about being alert and listening to God.

In recent months, I've encouraged our church trying to be prayerful and open to God as we think about our future as a church.

Last year, we finished a major and very expensive project on our building—we put a new boiler in the B and C wings of the church. As we made this recommitment to our building, I asked staff and Ruling Elders to be prayerfully open to ways that we might make better use of this building to serve the community.

Not long after making that request, I was in my office late one afternoon and someone walked in. He asked if we might be open to having an AA group here at the church. We worked out the details and now, in addition to our two Saturday groups, we have other AA meetings on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, providing space for dozens of people to find healing and new life.

And we have various music groups and educational groups, we are storing supplies for refugee resettlement, and our scout groups are going strong.

In fact, on Tuesday, five young men are being celebrated as Eagle Scouts here at Covenant, including Ian Soderberg, son of Mark Soderberg and Page Moreau.

Did this minor surge of activity in our building happen because we prayed about it? I can't say for sure, but I do know when I take time to listen and pray and connect with God, my days go more smoothly, and it seems that "coincidences" happen more often.

Making a commitment to regular Bible reading and regular prayer are holy habits that help us stay on track as Christians.

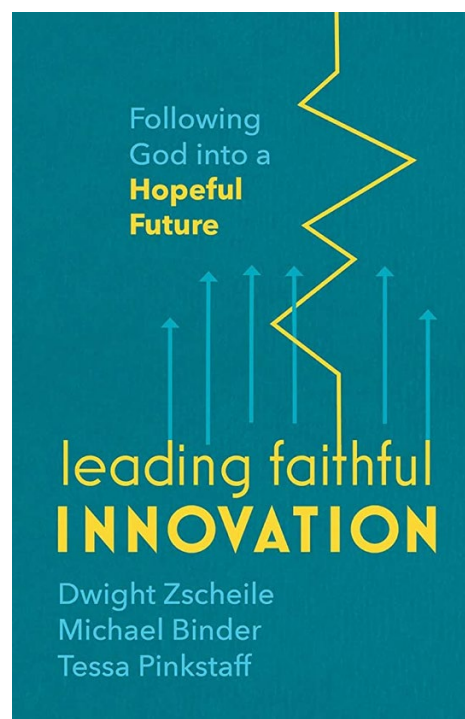
I'm reading a fascinating book right now, called *Leading Faithful Innovation: Following God into a Hopeful Future*.

In essence the book invites church leaders and really all Christians to listen for God, to pay attention.

"Pay attention" what a fascinating phrase. Like it costs something.

In a chapter on listening, the authors make their case by stating:

"Our most precious resource in the twenty-first century is arguable our attention, largely because so many entities are fighting to capture it... What we pay attention to, and what we decide to ignore, influences who we are becoming as human beings. Who or what are we allowing to shape us?" (p. 55)



There are so many distractions out there. We have to be smart and careful.

If we want to carry on with what Jesus began, if we want the church to continue to thrive, if we really want to learn and live God's love, if we want to live lives of meaning and purpose, we need to pay attention to God.

Please pray with me.

*O God, thank you for the gift of new and abundant life. Show us how to live. Teach us your ways. Guide our steps, as we follow in the way of Jesus. Amen.*