

May 12, 2013  
Acts 16:16-34  
Psalm 97  
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21  
JOHN 17:20-26

## LET'S GIVE CHRIST A HAND

Today we celebrate the great “between time”. According to the Gospels, Jesus rose from the dead very early on Easter Sunday morning and his followers experienced his bodily presence with them for a long enough period of time to know that he was truly alive, that there was no body left in the tomb, and at the same time that he was alive in a way that nobody had ever been before. The disciples came to know that they would only be breaking bread literally and physically with their Lord for a long enough period of time for them to know for sure that he had conquered sin and death and opened the door to new and greater life for them *right now* and forever.

And then -- the accounts vary in the Gospels and Acts -- at some point after that Easter Sunday they knew that they would no longer be experiencing his tangible presence, that he had ascended into Heaven, that the next period of salvation history would now unfold, and that it was to be *their* mission inspired and led by him, as *they* would be filled with the promised Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

No longer would *his* hands break bread at table with them; they would do this for each other. No longer would *his* hands physically touch others to heal them; *their* hands, empowered by him, would do this. No longer would *his* hands physically point out injustice and oppression and rebuke oppressors; *their* hands would have to do this. No longer would *his* hands physically pick up little children and bless them; *their* hands would have to do this.

As one great spiritual leader who was not biologically a mother but was and is a “mother of the Church”, Teresa of Avila, said, “Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet but yours.”

Luke marks “Ascension Day” as 40 days after Easter and Pentecost as 50 days after Easter. Ascension Day was last Thursday and Pentecost is next Sunday, so right here and now we are remembering and celebrating that **interim period** the disciples found themselves in, the interim between Jesus’ ascension into Heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, that 10 day interim period 2,000 years ago was just the beginning of a much longer interim period which all Christians are *still in*: the interim between Jesus' ascension into heaven and his *return* to earth to conclude history and to usher in the Kingdom of God. That is the joyful expectation with which the Book of Revelation -- and the entire Bible -- ends, which we just heard: "Jesus said, 'See, I am coming soon...'" And the author of the book earnestly concludes, "'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.'"

"'Come, Lord, Jesus'", we say as well. Bring in the Kingdom of God, end warfare, disease, starvation and suffering. Bring in justice, peace and healing to a world in which over 1,000 factory workers in Bangladesh can die in a building collapse, in which over a million have died in a brutal war in the Congo which is barely noticed in this country, in which three women can be kidnapped, enslaved and exploited for 10 years not in some far off country but in Cleveland, a world in which in this very city there are women spending Mother's Day in a secure, undisclosed location because they are survivors of domestic violence whose only chance for survival is to trust someone other than the person they once trusted most.

Come, Lord Jesus. Some people have used their hands to oppress, to imprison, to terrify. Come, Lord Jesus. Come and end all this.

And Jesus says to us, in effect, "YOU also have hands. YOU are my hands at work in the world until I come again. How are you using *your* hands in a world in which so many hands are being used wickedly?"

So this is the Interim Period for all Christians, in which we are Christ's hands to do his work in the world, using the minds which God also gave us. As Carl Zimmer wrote in the May, 2012 National Geographic magazine [I lift up my hand], "The hand is where the mind meets the world."

In the Book of Acts, Jesus' growing phalanx of followers used their hands, and their minds and their hearts, to *liberate* others in Christ's name and with his power, and realized that they were not always going to be applauded for doing this. In today's reading Paul *heals* a slave girl in a way that renders her less profitable to her owner, and her owner responds by stirring up both the crowd and the legal authorities, resulting in Paul and his companions getting beaten by the police and thrown into prison.

Anyone who experienced or has learned about the Civil Rights movement will find Paul's experience deeply familiar.

And then Paul converted his jailer. That too has happened in more recent history. We have major challenges in America, but we are not the same country that we were when Emmet Till was murdered back before the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and that is because so many people put their hands -- and feet, and minds, and hearts -- to work for the sake of the Gospel of peace and justice, guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

And not just in America. One of the things peoples' hands can do is cast ballots, and whenever I go to vote -- and I *love* to go to vote, no matter how small the election, to exercise my freedom as an American -- I think about the hands of the people who cast ballots for the first time in their lives in 1994 in South Africa, about the same time in Eastern Europe, more recently in Libya and Egypt, and also those hundreds of millions who still yearn to cast ballots in places like China. "The hand is where the mind meets the world."

This, of course, is also an **interim period** in a more specific way for Christ Church, New Brunswick, and interim period which has lasted since the resignation of your rector, the Rev. Dr. Deborah Meister, in August, 2011, and will last until the arrival of your next rector, which will be...well, we don't know yet. Sometime this summer? God knows.

The disciples were busy in that 10 day interim period between Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, obeying his command to "stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." And once your new rector comes -- unless Jesus returns first -- you will still be in the larger and longer interim period in which all Christians find themselves until Jesus returns. Our task is not to be a nostalgia society only remembering the old days when Jesus walked the earth, nor to be paralyzed into inactivity by our anticipation of his return, but, in the words of the Episcopal Catechism (p. 861 in The Book of Common Prayer), "to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world."

I have realized more and more that Christ Church is doing this in a great many ways that are not visible to those who are outside of our fellowship, of our building and may not even be visible in many of our worship services. There is a lot of invisible wonderfulness here, and one theme of our particular interim period is, to reverse the image from the Harry Potter books, to "throw a 'visibility cloak'" over some of the currently invisible wonderfulness of Christ Church.

So last week, we celebrated in the worship service our four teenaged nursery care givers (who by virtue of their ministries serve in the nursery, not in the sanctuary) who have all received Red Cross certification in CPR and First Aid. Recently at each service we commissioned our Lay Eucharistic Visitors who take the sacrament to the sick, making this important ministry more visible, and soon we will be including a brief prayer at the end of any service after which one or more of them will go forth. We have celebrated the ministries of our Food Pantry volunteers and have photographs posted of our Elijah's Promise Soup Kitchen volunteers. Our World Mission bulletin board makes visible ministries like protecting an entire village in Africa from malaria, stocking a children's library in Sierra Leone, and helping a Christian-run hospital which serves all sorts of people in Gaza.

We have a map posted which makes visible the names of members of our parish community who are in college and graduate school, and on June 16 we will visibly honor 2013 graduates. We have an extraordinary youth program with nine adult advisors and mentors, and we will visibly celebrate youth in worship, with major input from the youth themselves, on June 2. We celebrate our Children's Choir visibly and audibly today as we celebrate Director Renata Koumendouros' ministry here as well.

But we're just getting started.

Next Sunday, on the Day of Pentecost, we will celebrate the multi-national, globe-girdling Christian Church not only by hearing scripture in a wonderful array of languages, but also with a parade of nations in our processions at the beginning of the 8 and 10:30 services, with people carrying the flags of the countries of birth of people who worship here. Do you know that people have come to this sanctuary to worship from *five continents*? Let's make that visible and celebrate it! *Everyone* is welcome here.

Christ Church has been a Welcoming Congregation to gays and lesbians for years -- that's not new -- but what's new is our determination to make that welcome *visible* to those currently outside of our fellowship, especially those who might be yearning for a church like this. So, since our unanimous Vestry vote last month, we are now listed on three gay-friendly church websites making our welcome to GLBT visible. Let's celebrate. *Everyone* is welcome here.

Unlike many church buildings far newer than these, we are largely handicap-accessible. Someone in a wheelchair can come in through our garden, in the tower door all the way to the altar rail, and all the way to coffee hour, without any barriers. Someone can come in the Paterson St. door to the offices, classrooms and bathrooms without a

barrier, and thanks to the lift, can access the upstairs and this building from Paterson St. as well. We have spent a good bit of effort and money to make this happen and continue to do so through the maintenance contract on the lift. But how does anyone who has not already been inside the buildings know this, because we have no signs outside which make our accessibility visible? So we are working on outdoor signs to make this aspect of welcome *visible*, as well as on our website. Everyone is welcome here.

All people are invited by God to be followers of Jesus Christ and be filled by the Holy Spirit, to be Christ's hands at work in the world. And we're never too old or too young to start, so last Sunday we celebrated the baptism of an adult and next Sunday we will celebrate the baptisms of three small children. And it's not just "cute" that we welcome children, for they are God's servants too in wonderful ways *now*. Just recently one of our parishioners had surgery, but before she was rolled into the O.R., she passed the peace with her nurses. She is not quite two years old. Already she is using her hands well. Now that she can walk, let us follow in her footsteps, giving Jesus a hand. Ours.

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