

"One of these must become a witness with us to Christ's resurrection."

In the name of God, who knows everyone's heart: Amen.

I left college in the cool light of dawn exactly four years ago this morning. I settled back in my train seat and tried to sleep. I'd walked with my class the previous morning, and anyone might be nervous the day after. But my own nerves were less excusable. You see, my passport was probably in Boston, along with most of my earthly possessions. And I had realized this the night before, as I finished packing for my choir's tour of Australia.

So I had a long day ahead of me. I had to catch a dawn train to retrieve my passport from a storage locker in Boston as soon as it opened. Then I had to hurry back down the eastern seaboard and try not to fall too far behind my choir as they sped inexorably toward Newark airport. The plan was a good one, totally workable, even affordable thanks to the Chinatown bus. But it depended on many things out of my control. My passport had to be where I thought it was. The big, exhaust-belching machine of northeastern transit, with all its moving parts, had to do its job without breakdowns or serious delays. I needed chance to work for me.

The sun kept on climbing up over the Atlantic. Sleep would not be possible. But still, I rested oddly secure. I'd gotten my panicking done the night before, called my mom, the whole thing. And then I'd made my plan, as best I could. Now all I could do was settle back in my seat, and get to Boston at the same time as my train.

This morning's reading from Acts finds the believers in a place of transition. Over the past two months, they have been through a lot with Jesus, through death to life again. Shortly before this—last Thursday, on the church calendar—the risen Jesus left them for good and was hidden from their sight. School's out, as it were. They've been Jesus' disciples for three years and change. Now they're off on their own.

As long as these women and men have been followers of Jesus, most of what they've been through has been out of their control. They didn't set the travel itinerary or make the miracles happen. They tried sometimes to tell Jesus whom to heal or whom to bless, but he kept on doing both whether they liked it or not. They didn't make the crowds love Jesus, or the mob turn on him. They didn't push Jesus to the cross or raise him up again. And once he was back, you can be sure they didn't want him gone! It's not that they'd been passive as they shared in Christ's ministry. They had worked with Jesus, wept for his death, witnessed to his resurrection. But all the changes, all the transitions, were driven by someone else, and most of all by Jesus.

So now what? They don't have Jesus, but they do have his final promises. As Acts tells the story, right before this morning's passage, Jesus promised them the Holy Spirit, and promised that they would go on being his witnesses. The disciples don't know yet what Jesus means by the Holy Spirit, exactly; and if you don't, I won't spoil it. I'll just say, please, come back next week! But on the second promise, the disciples can take action. They can be Jesus' witnesses.

They can tell his story, as Peter says, "from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us."

And to do that, they need another witness. They haven't just lost Jesus; they've lost Judas too. I think we see the disciples here at the far end of grieving Judas' loss. They've found a story to tell about him, a story that fits in with the larger story of God's faithfulness in Jesus. They're looking to move on; and that means finding someone else to do Judas' work in the community.

This story, of finding a new witness, is the heart of this morning's reading. It's the moment when the community of believers takes charge of their own future. They know what their work is going to be: They need to tell Jesus' story. And they have within their community everything they need to tell this story. They have each other. They have the people who were with Jesus the whole time and can proclaim his blessing, his word, and his resurrection. In fact, they have more than they need!

And yet. Even as they take matters into their own hands—even as they take their first steps into a new, common maturity—they leave a role for chance. They cast lots to pick the new apostle, like picking numbers from a hat or flipping a coin. In their place, we'd probably take a vote. Maybe we'd go for some kind of consensus decision. But the disciples choose to leave this leadership decision out of their own hands. They pray, and flip a coin, and trust that God will work in the outcome.

The church hasn't used this method to choose leaders in a long time, and

that's probably for the best. We believe that God's will works in community more than in chance. But today, I think there's wisdom in listening for God in the things we can't control.

In the last month, we've had several major leadership transitions at St John's. Today, Marie Campbell finishes her time among us as a Micah intern, and prepares to move to Nashville, where she'll begin theological study in the fall. Others among us may be finishing school years as teachers or parents. Some will have people close to us graduating. Still others may have lost work, or enough work, or had a search for work terribly complicated by the recession. And if you or someone you love is going through any kind of transition, you don't need me to tell you that it means finding things are missing, and losing some control.

Four years ago, I did get my passport, and I made my flight just fine. I made the best plan I could—but I can only thank God it worked. The disciples, faced with both loss to mourn and work to do, made the best transition plan they could; but they also trusted its outcome to God, the best way they knew how. That isn't to say that God was clearing traffic on 95 for my sake, or even that God rigged the disciples' coin flip. But, especially in times of transition, maturity often looks like doing all you can, then looking for God in the rest. And the promise of Acts—the good news that we can all bear witness to—is that whenever we seek God, even in chance, and even in death, God is waiting to be found.

Alleluia! Amen.