Sunday April 23, 1978

"RAPTURE AND ROUTINE" Acts 1:12-16, 21-26
No. 2 in a series: "What Happened/Happens After Easter?"

What happened after the first Easter almost 2000 years ago, and what still happens after that pivotal event in the church of Jesus Christ? Last week, in the first sermon in this series, we noted that for the first several weeks following the resurrection, the disciples were confused and had no sense of direction. They didn't know what to do about the fact that Jesus was alive. During these first weeks, Jesus was with them and then at times was not with them. He appeared and disappeared. He was present and then absent. He did however, give his disciples some advice. He told them to wait for the promise of the Father.

This was needed and good advice. In effect, Jesus was reminding his early followers and us, that we do not usually understand something until sometime after we have experienced it. A time of waiting is necessary. The reason for this is that a profound experience involves much more than the intellect. It affects our total being. Thus it is only after the intellect has had the opportunity to reflect on all the various aspects of the experience that its significance begins to be understood. So last week's sermon was entitled, "Sometimes we have to wait!"

The disciples waited, but it wasn't easy. They wanted answers. They still had difficulty in understanding the purpose of Jesus' ministry, his death and resurrection. They continued to think in terms of his restoring the kingdom of Israel as a nation with power here and now. Jesus had to remind them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which God has fixed by his own authority."

It was another way of saying--God will carry out his will in ways that are still unknown to us and God will carry it out in his own time. Don't try to predict God's future. Your job is to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. God's community is to be world-wide, universal, everywhere, and it is not to be confined to any particular geographic area or any particular race or nation of people. And it's your job to spread that Good News!

This was such a radical and new idea that the disciples had difficulty comprehending it. So the 40 days following the resurrection were days of waiting, resting, trying to understand what had happened and what they were to do about it.

Then the disciples had the experience of the final disappearance of Jesus. They were together on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave some final instructions and then told them that they would see him in a physical sense no more. He was no longer localized, but was universal.

This period of 40 days and the experience of Jesus leaving them in a physical sense, were times of rapture, that is enchantment, exultation, high excitment. The days were filled with visions, dreams, trances--what we today would call "altered states of consciousness." The days following Jesus final disappearance were also filled with ecstasy and prayer.

The Book of Acts describes the scene with these words--"Then they (the disciples) returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet. . .and they went to the upper room where they were staying, (no doubt the same upper room where Jesus had had the last supper with them and where he appeared to them several times after the resurrection). And what did they do while they were together still waiting. "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers."

We have a description of this first Christian congregation, a rather small homogenous community, made up of Jewish followers of Jesus, with the eleven disciples as the inner circle.

These were days of peace and joy. There was a sense of being in God's presence. These were days of reflection and discussion and prayer.

But now from the glory of the resurrection and from these upper room and mountain top experiences, the disciples were pitched into the problems of church administration. There were details and routine matters to be dealt with. Life is often a strange mixture of rapture and routine and we cannot have one without the other.

In the case of the early church with the disciples as leaders, there were decisions to be made, assignments of responsibility and all kinds of small and large problems to be solved. Today we call all of this "administration." And that's exactly what it is. Administration is a necessary part of any enterprise, the church included.

The first matter the disciples had to take care of was to fill the vacancy left by Judas who had betrayed Jesus and then taken his own life. Peter took the lead in the selection process. The congregation at that time numbered about 120 persons. It was agreed that the eleven disciples who had been chosen by Jesus should be increased to twelve. Peter suggested one basic qualification for the person who would take the place of Judas. That person should be chosen from among those who had been followers of Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry.

Two men were nominated for the position and then the eleven disciples chose one of them--a man named Matthias. This was just the first aministrative detail the early church had to deal with. Within the coming months there were many more and a lot of them more difficult. There were arguments among the early Christians that some were being neglected in the welfare system that had been set up. Later on a big dispute arose over the questions as to whether or not a person had to become a Jew before he or she could become a part of the Christian community.

Other questions were: How would future church leaders be selected? Did such leaders have to have the approval of the central church in Jerusalem? How would the early congregations raise money so that missionaries could be sent to other places? All these questions and more had to be faced.

Somtimes in the past we have too much idealized the early church and made it something it wasn't. Merely because the early church was filled with the Holy Spirit did not mean that it faced no practical everyday routine problems.

Yet I've often heard people describe the early New Testament Church as being one characterized by dedicated believers who spent their days witnessing for Christ, engaging in social action and caring for the poor. At times the early church has also been described as being open

to all people and filled with members who had been divested of any prejudices or class distinctions and who held all things in common without any problems.

Then those who want to describe the early church in this way go on by way of contrast to describe the church today as filled with members who are racist, prejudiced, as uninvolved in social change efforts and as selfish and as narrow as people who are not in the church, if not more so.

But as we can see, there is no evidence to support the claim of the golden age myth of the New Testament church when Peter and the other disciples were in charge. It was as filled with problems and needed administrative matters to be taken care of as efficiently as possible as does the church in our time.

In fact, I never cease to be amazed as how Biblical writers go out of their way to demonstrate that Biblical characters were ordinary sinners more often than extra-ordinary saints. Such Old Testament heroes as Abraham, Jacob, David and Moses were scarcely heroic in any idealized sense. They were human people with human weaknesses. Neither their weaknesses nor their strengths were the important thing, however, for thse were people whom God called to do his work.

Reading between the lines of a story like that of Moses teaches not that Moses was an especially good lawyer or leader, but that if God can use a fellow like Moses to such advantage, a hotheaded murderer with a speech impediment--then God also might be able to use you and me.

Nor is there any evidence of a perfect church in the New Testament. As we have been seeing, Jesus' disciples were forever exhibiting misunderstanding; they were at times self-seeking and had many of the same weaknesses as all of us. I once heard a little girl say, "It seems like Jesus wasn't a very good judge of character to choose men like them for disciples." And yet that is precisely the point--Jesus did choose people like them. He had no illusions as to their potential for sainthood, but knew that even people like them could be used to do God's work and get God's message across.

The book of Acts gives I think, a rather honest account of what happened after Easter and what problems the early

church faced. Certainly there were many high points in that church's life, what we have been calling this morning times of rapture, but there were also low points and there were times when routine matters had to be taken care of. There were also times of deceit, jealously, conflict and dispute.

The early church's existence was not some sort of pristine, secure golden age without the ambiguities of our modern situation. Those Christians faces many of the same temptations and dilemmas we face and we can gain comfort from that fact.

The first century was a time of tension, when the future of the church was often in doubt, when there were deep divisions and doctrinal disputes, when heretics prayed alongside martyrs, and when back-sliders and infidels probably outnumbered the truly faithful, in short it was a time much like that in which we live.

Then as now, life was filled with that strange mixture of rapture and routine. Think how often this is true in your own life. I know how frequently it is true in mine. After being inspired by an extra-ordinary worship service, or by an individual with a deep faith, then I find I have to deal with a leaking roof, or a broken piece of furniture or a complaint about someone who used the church building and left a mess to clean up.

Each of our lives are filled with the same mixture. That's the way life is. The secret is to keep rapture and routine in some kind of balance. We can get all bogged down in routine and administration so that we leave no room or miss the rapture or ecstasy in our lives. Organization, administration, routine details can become a kind of strait jacket in which the central purpose or business of the church is paralyzed. This can happen in any enterprise, not just the church.

The things which the early church had to learn and which we have to remember in all that we do with routines and administration are these: (1) Routine work and administration will always be with us. It is a necessary but not ~~one~~ the most important part of any institution or enterprise.

(2) Since it is a necessary part of any enterprise, do the routines matters as efficiently and effectively as possible.

(3) And thirdly always remember that routine and administrative matters are designed to serve us and the enterprise rather than our becoming a slave to the routines or administrative details. If a certain routine is not working, then change it.

Other good advice in this matter of the mixture of rapture and routine, not only in religion but in any endeavor in which we find ourselves involved, is this: Pick the future as against the past: Focus on opportunity rather than on problem: Choose your own direction--rather than climbing on the bandwagon and: Aim high, aim for something that will make a difference, rather than for something that is safe and easy to do.

And again remember, life will always be a combination of rapture, high points, inspirational moments, and routine, rather dull matters which must be attended to. It can never be all one without the other. Furthermore we can find God not only in the moments of rapture, but in taking care of routine matters also. Amen.