



## WAITING FOR WHAT'S NEXT

May 28, 2017, Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:1-14 20:19-31; I Peter 1:3-9

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*Life-giving God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, open our minds to the mystery of faith and the liberating truth that your Word still moves in our church. We give you thanks for the story of Jesus' Ascension and the freeing awareness that we can rely on a power beyond our own. Remind us again that while we await your return, you gift us with your Spirit. Send your blessing, we pray, on the church, and on all of us, opening our hearts to hear your Word. Amen.*

This morning's text begins during a time of transition, an intentional time of waiting and preparation. The book of Acts moves us away from the Easter narratives where Jesus continues to teach and guide the disciples after his resurrection. The reality is beginning to set in that Jesus will no longer be with them and things will have to change. This text is a transition story because we find the disciples waiting for what will happen next. We don't often remember the Ascension as a celebratory event, because ultimately it's a story of transition and waiting. And which one of us excels at waiting?

As Luke begins the second volume of his work, he offers us a recap at its beginning. After the miracle of the resurrection, Jesus spends 40 days after Easter with his disciples preparing them for their ministry abroad. And then "while Jesus was staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father."<sup>1</sup> The disciples question when Jesus will actually restore everything to Israel, but again Jesus tells them to wait. Nothing is all that clear, but in their anticipation the disciples wait for what might follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:4



But did you catch the drama? Just when they begin to digest their teacher's words, "Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."<sup>2</sup> In that brief moment, Jesus disappears from them and ascends into the heavens above. The disciples are left speechless and confused staring into the sky in bewilderment.

When it comes to The Feast of the Ascension, the celebration is often rather bleak in our Presbyterian tradition. There was no special service this past Thursday, no big event to recognize this day in the church calendar. Although, I found a children's craft this weekend that, with the pull of a string, it allows children to move Jesus into the sky as his disciples watch from the mountaintop. I'm jealous I didn't have it for you in the pews today. There might be logic to the fact that we don't make a big deal out of the Ascension. Why make a significant holiday out of a confusing transition? It's puzzling, uncertain, and no one is really sure what will happen next. But as often as it's ignored, the Ascension is incredibly essential to our Easter faith.

In Christian theology, the ascension is the completion of the resurrection story. Jesus' ministry could not be complete until he returned to the divine location from which he came. The resurrection, in all of its mystery and wonder, came to its fulfillment in Jesus' return to his Father in heaven, because at the moment of the Ascension, the Son of God returned to sit at God's right hand. Presbyterian minister Charles Williamson says "the ascension of Jesus is God's final confirmation of [him]. The one whose birth was signaled by a star and announced by the heavenly host, whose baptism was noted by a voice from heaven, now receives God's final seal of approval."<sup>3</sup> In the Ascension, Jesus returns to his heavenly home as the Son of God. As we affirm in our creeds, Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. Thank goodness for the Ascension, because it completes everything we believe about the resurrection at Easter.

But for the Church, in this significant moment of transition, the Ascension ultimately points the finger at us. We're now in the spotlight, because this story reminds us we've been left behind to serve. In the Ascension the disciples realize

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:9.

<sup>3</sup> Interpretation Bible Study Series, "Acts", WJK: 2000, page 9.



Jesus has left them in charge. They don't yet have the power of the Holy Spirit, but the Ascension is their moment to realize that it's up to them to lead, to further the kingdom Jesus established. After being with Jesus during these miraculous 40 days, now their teacher's words of preparation sink in; he really was preparing them, and us, to further God's kingdom in his absence. When he leaves them, it confirms that he's leaving his ministry in their hands, which is to say 'in our hands.'

So, back to the waiting. Before the disciples lead this new movement, they must wait. While Acts 1 is a story of transition, something not to overlook is how intentional the waiting was for the disciples. Although they first appear dumbfounded by Jesus' ascent into the clouds, Jesus' followers don't stay that way. They wait, but they wait with a purpose. They return back to where Jesus told them to go, and they gather with all of Jesus' followers to pray. Their waiting is not passive, because in their waiting they pray, seeking guidance. They wait and discern where God will lead their community next.

What might seem like a small act is actually quite profound and courageous. The disciples, post-ascension, didn't gather to make plans, organize events, form a committee, or strategize their next steps. Instead, as a community, the first thing they did together was lift their voices in prayer. This act begins a pattern of patient discernment that we will find all the way through the book of Acts.

We New Yorkers are a people used to waiting: waiting for buses, cabs, or trains. We wait for our cell phone batteries to charge. We wait for replies to emails, texts, and phone calls. We wait in line for any number of activities. But thanks to the speed at which most of these things happen, waiting patiently is not something very many of us excel at. Therefore, I want to make the argument today that the reason the disciples are called to wait is because waiting in this way is a habit that they need to learn. And the same can be said for us. Our call to wait, and to wait with purpose, is the same as theirs.

The Bible is actually full of people that God asks to wait—Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Mary, and Peter—all are called to wait for God's timing and God's purposes. Many theologians make the case that there are several spiritual gifts in waiting. The first of these is that, when we take the time to wait, we begin to



realize our true motives and desires for the thing we are waiting on. The longer we wait, our true motivation rises to the surface, and our values become clear. Furthermore, faithful waiting builds patience because the things we wait for become those gifts we treasure the most. Waiting grows an appreciation within us because when it arrives we truly treasure the object of our desire.

Waiting can also strengthen our own spiritual maturity, by allowing us to grow in patience and endurance. Waiting allows us to recognize our own need for control but how little control we actually have in this world. It's through waiting that we learn to rely on God, the one who truly has the power to make everlasting change. In waiting we lean less on our own fallen ability to create change and instead trust in God's timing and presence. Whether our waiting is caused by transition, loss, or joy, we wait knowing that there is only one Lord and Savior who can truly guide us during this time. Waiting builds spiritual maturity within each of us because it gives us space to trust in God's timing.

Tradition holds that Mother Teresa was not a big fan of reporters. Her work was with the poor and suffering and she had no time to stop and explain the ministry of Jesus to the press. But many tried to interview her. Once such reporter traveled all the way to the slums of Calcutta, India in order to interview Mother Teresa. On one hand, he knew that Mother Teresa would give him a good story, but on the other hand he also knew that this type of major publicity would probably get her religious order, The Missionaries of Charity, some much-needed publicity and, more importantly, some donations. The reporter contacted the hospice home where Mother worked and he set up an appointment for the interview. He was desperate for inspiration and eager to find out why she dedicated herself so selflessly to others. She was known for her one-on-one connection to others in her ministry, and this reporter was hungry to find out why she put all her energy into the poor.

That morning the reporter arrived five minutes early, wanting to respect another person's time. Her secretary greeted him warmly but told him that Mother would be a few minutes more before she would be able to speak with him. Recognizing the demands on such an important figure, the reporter patiently sat down on a bench in the hallway outside of her office. Down at the other end of the hallway, he could see one very old nun shuffling from room to room, taking a tray of food



to this patient, rinsing out the bedpan of that one. After thirty minutes the secretary returned to see if he would like a glass of water. “Will Mother be able to see me soon,” he asked hopefully. “Certainly,” she said with a smile, “but she is a very busy woman.”

After an hour of waiting, he asked someone passing by where the bathroom was. After two hours he started to get angry. Nothing had changed. No one had come back to check on him. He still hadn’t seen Mother. There were still the same patients in the same beds around him, still the same old, stooped nun working her way from room to room. Her came looking for inspiration but was growing increasingly impatient. Why wasn’t Mother Teresa able to meet with him, he thought?

It turns out, in his impatient waiting, the reporter missed it. He came to Calcutta, waiting to be inspired, and he missed it. In his impatience, he missed that it was the actual Mother Teresa herself that he watched in that hallway, moving from patient to patient, caring for others’ needs. The old, arthritic nun at the other end of the hallway bathing, and cleaning, and feeding her patients was the inspiration. Holy Christian ministry was right there, but he didn’t know how to patiently attend to it, let alone faithfully wait for it.

Friends, waiting is a spiritual discipline—it takes practice and commitment. And ultimately, waiting itself can become a form of prayer. In the waiting, through the transition, our eyes are opened to the quiet ways God has been moving all along. When we wait, we begin to see God at work, through the lives of others, through the witness of those around us. Waiting moves us beyond our own hopes and desires and draws us closer to the vision God has for us. When we wait, allow God’s patience to enter in our lives, we see just what God has in store for us.

As a church, we ourselves are entering our own time of waiting. And just like with the disciples, we are called to wait but not passively. Instead, we are called to actively pray, seek discernment, and listen to one another for how and where God is leading us in ministry. We are called to be patient enough to align ourselves with the movement of God’s Spirit. We may, very realistically, find ourselves forming committees and making plans, but if we’re not careful, we may forget to wait. If



we're not careful, we will miss God's presence and move forward with our own agendas.

It might seem like a simple thing, but often the most courageous thing we can do in waiting for what's next is pray and seek God's guidance. If the Ascension completes the Resurrection, our part in this story is to discern how God will lead us. In waiting for what's next, the most faithful response is prayer, filled with patience. As we remember the Ascension today, may we all be so faithful as to wait and pray for what comes next.

*In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*