

Seventh Sunday of Easter
Ascension Sunday
“Active Waiting”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Acts 1:6-14 (The Message)

“And you will be my witnesses”

I began my bible study this week by asking the participants what comes to mind when they hear the word “witness.” Ideas quickly emerged including: seeing an event, or being on the stand in a courtroom, and telling our story about what we saw.

As we explored the idea further, we agreed that if several people “witnessed” the same event, there is a high likelihood that we would each report the same experience somewhat differently. It’s both the blessing and the curse of lawyers who depend upon eyewitnesses to prove their case. So that what we are witnesses **to** and witnesses **of** may be slightly different.

Today’s story from the first chapter of Acts, has as its focus, the disciples as they witness a most unusual event.

Just when you thought the story of Jesus’ life (and afterlife) couldn’t possibly get any stranger – we happen upon this scene known as “The Ascension.” Completely foreign to human experience, we can only imagine what those first century apostles must have thought as they witnessed another unbelievable event in Jesus’ life.

Just think of the progression. They have just come through bitter disappointment as they witnessed the devastating death of Jesus – watching him die in the most cruel manner, by suffocation on the cross. Then they see him (or at least they think they did) as he is resurrected from the dead – some say they saw him at the tomb, some in the adjacent garden, and still others in the upper room where they were hiding trying to figure out what to do next.

We don’t know much about this period of time following Jesus’ resurrection, but tradition holds that he was somehow physically present on earth for about 40 days (the number 40 not necessarily exact, but symbolic of a significant period of time). In our modern liturgical calendar the season is known as Eastertide and extends, unofficially, from resurrection day – Easter Sunday – until Pentecost which we celebrate next week.

Ascension Day – which was officially observed by some churches this past Thursday – marks the occasion when Jesus leaves the earth with the promise that he will return one day again.

The apostles understandably don’t get it. And so they question, “Master, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? Is this the time?” Still hoping for an overthrow of

the imperial order, they were counting on Jesus to replace the royal power of Caesar with the sovereign authority of God. God's rule was so close they could almost taste it. Victory was in their grasp. It was all going to work out just as the prophets foretold.

But Jesus flips their expectations on end once again. "Yours is not to know the timing of God's will and way. What you'll get instead is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses (there's that word again) in Jerusalem, and all over Judea and Samaria, and even to the end of the world.

And just as they were about to ask him, "What the heck is the Holy Spirit?" he was taken up in a cloud and disappeared leaving them to stare up into the empty sky. Like I said, just when you thought the story couldn't possibly get any stranger.

They left that scene, rather quickly and returned to the same upper room they had previously been meeting in. It was there, the scriptures tell us, that they "stayed together," Peter, John, James, and Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, Judas the son of James and some women including Jesus' mother, Mary. They stayed together in this room and they prayed. Not yet equipped to do the work Jesus told them they were about to do as witnesses, they hung out there for a little while until they were ready to do what God was about to call them to do. In that upper room they prayed and they waited.

While the testimony of Jesus' ascension into heaven is intriguing, what interests me more on this Sunday – as we gather for worship – is the gathering of that first church as they waited for whatever was yet to come. I wonder about their conversation, their bewilderment in what they had just witnessed, and undoubtedly their arguments about what they should do next.

It was clear from Jesus' own words that their hopes that the current regime would soon be overthrown and replaced with them, in turn, being put in power was completely wrong-headed. God's rule in this world would not occur through power and might, but by the Holy Spirit which would be manifest in love. As William Barclay has said, "The coming of the reign of God will be characterized by love and its cousins, compassion and justice, not power and privilege, wealth or might."¹

Now, I invite you to hold that vision of the future in light of what you may have witnessed this week as our President visited the Pope and then interacted with the leaders of the 7 wealthiest nations at the G-7 Summit. I don't know about you, but I think the contrast couldn't be more apparent. That's not a criticism about the meeting or the intentional bravado displayed by any participant. It's just a striking contrast with Jesus' vision – God's ways are not our ways. And that's precisely why following the Jesus path and actively waiting for the Holy Spirit to empower the church is such a controversial and subversive activity.

¹ William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Daily Study Bible Series, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955, p.4.

Your power, Jesus says, is not of this world. Neither is it something that we control. On the contrary – it is a gift that we continually seek as we gather together in prayer.

I don't know how long it took for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. But when it did they were given power on high to be witnesses – to be Great Commandment people, that is loving God with their whole being and their neighbors as themselves – AND – Great Commission people, carrying the good news of God's love in Christ to the ends of the earth.

Finally, notice this is not a solo endeavor. What we see gathered in the upper room is not unlike what we have gathered here today – an intentional community seeking to know and to do God's will in our world. We would do well to pay attention to the message received then. It has amazing relevance for us today:

1. The power of this world does not hold a candle to the ultimate power of God.
2. We, too, must actively wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit to guide, empower, and unite us in doing the will of God.
3. Our motivation is love.

May God grant us the desire, the patience, as well as the strength and courage to be faithful in our discipleship – and may the witness of our lives make a difference in the world.

Amen.