

Easter 7 - A (2020)
Acts 1:6-14

Do you ever wake up in the morning and wonder what day it is? Sometimes that happens for me. When my schedule has been turned upside down and the days blend into each other, it can sometimes be difficult to keep the days straight. Or maybe you're retired, and alarm clocks and calendars don't mean as much to you as they did when you had a paying job. How then, do you mark your days? How do you keep track of time?

For many people, the coronavirus pandemic has turned the whole idea of time and schedules upside down. Maybe you have been laid off or furloughed and your week no longer has a schedule. Maybe you're a student and, with school on hold until at least September, your normal schedule no longer applies. Even "normal" Sundays, the day on which we would normally have public worship, have been put on hold until at least June 21. When our schedules are upended and the future is uncertain and everything we have trusted in and depended on which gave meaning and structure to our lives is gone or threatened, when the hopes and dreams that have kept us going are only a distant haze, life becomes more difficult.

So, imagine how the very first followers of Jesus must have felt about his answer when they asked about what was next. This is the basis of the conversation in Acts 1 -- today's Bible reading. Basically, Jesus is having a final debriefing before leaving on a trip -- a vertical and heavenly one. And, of course, they have questions.

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" the disciples asked (v. 6).

The question makes sense.

They had been on an emotional roller coaster with Jesus in recent days.

For three years, they followed him. They heard him talk frequently about a special time to come. He started his ministry telling them that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, was at hand.

They listened as he told stories about banquets, mustard seeds and treasure buried in a field that he said were ways of describing this new reality to come.

They were with him when he entered Jerusalem several weeks earlier. They saw the crowd waving palm branches and shouting their praises. By riding a donkey into the city, Jesus was fulfilling a prophecy that announced God's rule and reign. It was a huge statement. Surely, they thought, this must be the time.

At the Last Supper, he seemed to confirm it. "I will not drink the fruit of the vine again until I drink it with you in my Father's kingdom." Next stop, the kingdom of God, they must have thought.

Instead of a coronation, however, there was a crucifixion.

It appeared to be over. Their hopes were dashed. The dream of the restoration of the kingdom seemed to vanish. What now?

Why have some Christians tried to set a date for Jesus' return to us? Many people have made predictions about Jesus' return: the year 500, 1000, 1260, 1700, 1814, 1847, 1914, many times by Herbert W. Armstrong. They told us that He would return in the year 2000. We are still waiting

It might be something like Christmas, when Santa is checking our behavior long before that day. We should be preparing ourselves for that day all year long and not just counting the days.

“Is this the time?” Many disciples of old and disciples of today have asked when Christ will return to usher in God’s final realm. In spite of the many interpretations of scripture and exotic speculation, Jesus’ reply holds: “It is not for you to know.” Yes, we should always be preparing for His coming -- whether it will be His descending from heaven to receive all Christians or if we go to Him first in our own death. That day could come in an auto accident without us being prepared, or we could prepare for that day while lying in our hospice bed counting the days we have left. We don’t know; we are just called to believe and live out our belief.

In the meantime, we can’t stop living. Christians are called to “active waiting.” Active waiting is a very appropriate focus for this day in the flow from Jesus’ ascension to next Sunday’s Pentecost. At Ascension, we are impressed with the power of Christ. At Pentecost, we are filled and driven by the power of the Holy Spirit. But on these days, and on this day, we are in the waiting period ordered by Jesus himself at his ascension in Luke’s other ascension story (Luke 24:49—“Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high”).

Active waiting is not, of course, a one-time experience for us. We may be in the midst of waiting even as we prepare for action. This is not the same sort of waiting as that promoted by the Quietists in John Wesley’s day, and whose harmful teaching Wesley stridently opposed, an opposition that even makes its way into the General Rules! The Quietists believed and taught that we were to do nothing at all, even what was clearly taught in Scripture, until we had received an inner leading of the Holy Spirit to do it. Not at all, said Wesley. Where Scripture speaks, we are called to obey promptly and with all diligence!

But I think, like Jesus’ disciples, we don’t always know what to do while we’re waiting. We may be waiting for direction and not hearing it. You may not feel that you aren’t good enough or have the right talents and gifts to do what Jesus expects. It is true; each of us is differently gifted. Everyone’s lives are different, and everyone’s gifts are different. But God does have work for each and every one of us to do. Each of you have a job to do in your daily lives, no matter who you are or what you do or what your situation.

There's an old story about what happened when Jesus arrived back at the gates of heaven following His ascension. All the heavenly host were gathered to welcome God's Son, to celebrate His return home. Everybody had questions. They'd heard of his exploits on earth. They wanted to hear it straight from Him.

Jesus described His adventures at great length: the preaching, the teaching, the healing. They laughed when He told them how he'd tied the Pharisees' theological arguments up in knots, and they wept when He described both the agony of the cross and the joy of resurrection.

Someone asked Him, "Lord, now that You no longer physically walk the earth, who will share the good news?"

"I've got a plan," said Christ. "I've selected 11 followers, my closest friends. To them I've given the responsibility of sharing the good news."

"They must have some incredible talents, those 11," remarked one angel.

"Well, actually no," the Lord responded. "These are average people, with ordinary abilities. They're vain and sometimes foolish. One of them, their leader, denied me three times."

"But, Lord," objected another angel, "how can you be sure they'll get the job done?"

"To be perfectly honest, I can't be sure."

"What do you mean, you can't be sure? What if they fail? What's your backup plan?"

Quietly Christ answered, "I have no backup plan."

Jesus told the disciples what He expected them to do, but He also told them they would receive the power to do what He wanted them to do. And so, they had to wait to receive the Holy Spirit. Waiting is tricky. On the one hand, we can be impatient and miss God's guidance; we can try to do it on our own and really screw up. Or we can wait forever and never do anything because the time never seems right.

The problem is that the kingdom of God doesn't fill in our calendars or write checklists. Jesus doesn't give us a list of tasks we can put in our phones.

Instead, he calls his followers to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The timing concerning any ultimate physical expression of the reign of God on earth, he says, is for Him to worry about and, in any event, He Himself doesn't know! He had already told His disciples (maybe they forgot) that "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, *nor the Son*, but only the Father" (Matthew 24:26, emphasis added).

Our concern is to live into the mission of the church and the call of God today. It is not about getting ready for some later date. Our role is to be the people of God every day and do what God wants us to do right now.

As we transition from one way of living to another; as we transition into a new normal, we have the opportunity to rethink what it means to be church and what it means to be a Christian and a follower of Jesus. We aren't just in a pause mode before we return to the way we've always done things; we have the opportunity to relaunch the new and improved church and relaunch ourselves as a new and improved Christian.

This means, of course, penciling in time for worship, prayer, Bible study, performing random acts of charity, being faithful to your relationship responsibilities and being flexible enough to respond when God interrupts you, upends the same ol', same ol', and lifts you to serve in some wholly unexpected way. It is time to think outside the box.

When Jesus no longer walks the earth, who will be Christ's hands, feet, and voice? Who will reveal and embody God's grace and compassion for the vulnerable among us? The Church waits and prays for the promised power to do – and be – what is needed. Thing is, when you sign up to follow Jesus, you're going to have a ton of scheduling problems. Get used to it. Get over it. It is part of the thrill and challenge that we call ... discipleship!

Our Bible reading today gives us the names of those who were present in the upstairs room after Jesus' ascension: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (the zealot), and Judas (son of James). They all met together and were constantly united in prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus." (Vs.13b-14)

They aren't the only ones that Jesus called and are to be together, united in prayer. Those who are called include each of us. We don't go it alone, it's not just about us. We are better together and can do far more together than we can do alone. Our whole Methodist system revolves around our connectedness. Connected to each other and connected to God, we can do amazing things with the gifts of God. Jesus' promise to the disciples that they will receive power for witness reveals how the spread of the good news will occur. When Jesus no longer walks the earth, God's Spirit forms and commissions the Body of Christ, all of us, to do the work of Christ.

In Acts, the disciples are to go outside of Judea, to "Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." They don't start and stop in their own backyard. John Wesley said, "The world is my parish" and it is the same for us. We start in our own Church and our own communities and our own families, but Jesus expects us to minister to people around the world who we may never even meet or know or hear about.

Traditional treatments of the Ascension story have often taken on the same scolding tone as the "white-robed men" in the story. We're supposed to believe that the disciples are goofing off as they stand there staring into the sky, and that we wouldn't do the same thing in an equally bizarre scenario.

I'm not convinced that pointing to the mystery of Christ is such a bad idea. Somehow in our Christian journey, we need to find that delicate balance between "thinking and doing" and "feeling and being." There are times to get busy with living out our faith, but there are also times when we need to be still and stand in awe of the utter, jaw-dropping wonder of it all.

But while we are watching and waiting, we are also doing and being. Both point to the wonder of a God who loves us and who we love back and commit ourselves to serving. This ascension-of-Jesus story is a good time to look at our own gifts and our own obedience to Jesus' expectations and to serve as best we can in whatever situation we are placed. It is a good time to take a look at our spheres of influence and ask, "Am I *advancing* or *abdicated* my calling?" Are you just standing and watching or are you actively waiting and preparing?

Before that last day we can receive power from our Lord so that we can witness for him right now on earth. We may be witnesses to our next-door neighbor or on the mission field in some foreign country, or we may help prepare for that day by our contributions in the church offering or serving on a Board or Committee or creating new ways of worship like a puppet ministry or a praise band or running the audio/video system or preparing Communion or ushering or ????. God knows what you are being called to and is or certainly will be communicating that.

We don't know how our Lord will return, but instead of staring up into the sky waiting for that day we should rather spend our time in constant prayer. That is what church is for, so we can be waiting together for him. Yes, He is coming -- but don't sit around doing nothing but staring into the sky. Dream, plan, prepare, imagine what God has for us to do now and how, now that the world has changed, the Church can be better at spreading the good news of Jesus. Work while you wait and point to Jesus.