

Acts 1:1-14
April 7, 2024
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Go to Your Room

This morning, we shift from the cliffhanger at the end of Mark's gospel to the book of Acts. Scholars believe that this book is a sequel of sorts to Luke's gospel, written by the same author after about a ten-year gap, somewhere between the years 80 and 90 CE. It picks up where Luke's gospel ends, sort of. So, at the beginning of the sequel, we hear a recap, reminding us what happened before and a strong hint about where we're headed, with a significant pause in between. [Read Acts 1:1-14]

This scene of the apostles staring up into heaven is one of my favorite moments in scripture. These are the apostles after all, the ones who are commissioned and sent to do the important holy work of building the church within a few months of Jesus' death and resurrection and only a few days after his ascension. The image shared in the Banner and on Instagram and Facebook this past week depicts this scene rendered in a stained-glass window in the cathedral in Amiens, France. We can see the profiles of people staring up and we can see two feet just below the cloud. It is an odd, even humorous moment, and it is poignant, too. I can only imagine all that is racing through the apostles' minds as they catch the last glimpse of this one they have walked with and learned from, the one they have seen feed thousands with a snack and the one they have seen heal those who were otherwise without hope, the one they abandoned and the one they have been reclaimed and commissioned by. It is all so much to take in, so much to wrap their heads and hearts around, and so they stop and stare as he

confounds them yet again by being drawn up out of sight. I wouldn't be surprised if the apostles are too stunned to be thinking anything at all.

And that is ok. Yes, the two men in white come alongside and shake them from their stupor; they do not however snap their fingers insisting that the apostles get right to work. No, these angelic messengers remind them that Jesus will return and that they are called to do more than stare into the heavens. And then we read that the apostles return to Jerusalem and to the room where they do what Jesus told them to do: they wait together, they eat together, and they pray together. The first step in leading the fledgling church is waiting, eating, and praying, together. The first step is being sent to their room.

As a child, being sent to my room was a punishment, albeit a gentle one, a way to cool off and catch my breath, and maybe even realize that yelling at my mother or bullying my brother was not my best choice. As adults, we might actually wish for someone to send us to our room, to direct us to stay put and cool our heels for a bit—maybe even binge something light on Netflix, eat ice cream, and take naps. The apostles are being sent to their room as part of their job, as the first step in their commissioning for this next chapter. You may recall an upper room that they shared with Jesus just over a month before, when he broke the bread and broke the news to them that they would deny him and desert him. Now Jesus directs the apostles to remain together in their upper room—along with certain women—while they wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to be poured out on them ahead of what comes next.

When the apostles pepper Jesus with questions about when he will restore the kingdom of Israel, they still struggle to understand that the kingdom Jesus is ushering in is not intended

to be a return to ancient Israel's glory days.¹ Jesus does not wield power like any king or queen or emperor they have met before. Instead, he promises that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and empower them in a different way. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus preaches in his home synagogue, invoking and laying claim to words heard in the prophet Isaiah:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.’²

It will be the apostles' job, and in turn the church's job to bear witness, to point to and participate in building *that* kind of kingdom. The Spirit's power will not place the apostles—or the church—above anyone. It will instead whisk them alongside, so that the people of God can discern and live out God's vision, together. So it makes good sense that they spend some time together, praying, eating, resting, reflecting, and getting reacquainted with each other. Their upper room time is not a timeout but rather a time apart, time—perhaps our most valuable resource—set aside to gain a deeper understanding of what it is they are called to be and do in Christ's name.

¹ As Pastor Johanna Rehbaum points out in her sermon here:
<https://pastorjohanna.blogspot.com/2014/06/sermon-looking-back-looking-up-looking.html>

² Luke 4: 18-19, NRSVue

After the close of the service today, we will elect the next class of ruling elders and deacons. One of the things I love most about serving within the Presbyterian Church is that I do not lead alone. I moderate the session—our congregation’s governing board, and I have a vote as we make decisions together—ONE vote. There are no proxy votes. To vote elders must be present because our forerunners in the faith recognized that discerning the call of God and the leading of the Spirit is best done in a group. We begin and end every meeting with prayer—not to somehow make the Spirit show up, but rather to remind ourselves that we are called to listen for the ever-present Spirit’s guidance through the voices of one another, those we know well and those we don’t, those we see eye to eye with, and those we don’t. And that takes practice. The majority of these new officers will be ordained and installed on May 19, which thanks to an early Easter also happens to be Pentecost, the day when we celebrate the Spirit’s blowing in and sending the apostles from their upper room and out into Jerusalem and beyond. In the meantime, these new officers will participate in a kind of upper room time together. We will gather for three different sessions of officer training, with a bit of homework ahead of time and in between. They’ll be encouraged to be in conversation with those who have served in these positions recently, and they’ll pray with and for each other in intentional ways in pairs and small groups.

Because we are in this church thing together, just as the disciples were, this upper room time might be a good practice for the rest of us, too. Yes, they had followed Jesus for years in some cases, but it is a different thing to be witnesses and leaders after he has left their sight. They need time to reflect on what they have experienced, to grieve what they have lost, to process what they have been called and commissioned to do, and to begin to trust one another

as they look toward a new chapter, a new adventure. We are so good at doing, so gifted in seeking out ways to busy ourselves with the next and the newest project. And we are also very good at wearing ourselves out, too. Jesus took time apart to rest and pray, and he now sends the disciples to their room, not as punishment but rather as an encouragement to rest and reflect, to pray and prepare, too.

Imagine what it might look like if we took a deep breath together and prepared to celebrate Pentecost in an intentional way. Maybe it looks like asking someone else to pray with and for you over the next few weeks, someone you do not know all that well. Maybe it looks like meeting someone new for coffee to get to know them a bit better or calling someone you haven't chatted with in a while to ask how they are. Maybe it looks like coming to the picnic to hug and laugh with old friends and to make new ones. Maybe it looks like taking notice of the people around you as we pass the bread and the cup this morning, praying for those on your pew or the pew in front of you or the pew behind you, asking God to feed, nourish, strengthen, and encourage them even as you ask to be fed, nourished, strengthened, and encouraged, too. Maybe it looks like praying for our church's leaders and congregation as a whole, asking that God give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to know what exactly God is calling us to be and do in the name of the Risen Christ. Because no matter how hard we squint or how long we stare, we can't even begin to see the last bit of Jesus' pinky toe from here; we can however see one another, the ones we know well and the ones we don't, the ones who share our zip code and the ones who don't, the ones who religiously watch reruns of *Seinfeld* or *The Office* and those who don't, the ones who will cheer for Iowa tonight or Purdue tomorrow night or not, the ones who vote like us, think like us, or love like us and the ones who don't.

By the grace of God, we are in this blessed beautiful moment together, and I am convinced that God has more good things in store for us and through us as one small part of the larger Body of Christ. I am not suggesting that we stop sharing home communion or set Operation Sandwich aside. I am wondering what it might look like to pause in the midst of all that whirls around us to rest a bit, to unclench our jaws and lower our shoulders, to shut out the larger world's insistence on busyness and earning our way and never-ending division and ugliness. I wonder what it might feel like to step off the hamster wheel, to reflect, worship, pray, laugh, and even weep, and give thanks and praise for the God who has brought us here, to remember why we do what we do *together*. We cannot and do not earn grace. It is not up to us to usher in the kingdom of God all on our own. No single human has the answer for how we play a faithful part in that kingdom. And all of that, dear friends, is blessed good news. As Christ's beloved ones, we have received the gift of listening for the Spirit's leading in and through one another, the gift of answering God's call and following Christ's lead as best we know how, together. So maybe it is time to savor the gift of spending some time in our room, together.

Thanks be to God. Amen.