

# “The Church – Being Witnesses”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 7, 2024*

Second Sunday of Easter

Psalm 3

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Acts 1:3-14

## *Introduction*

According to the scriptures, the crucified and risen Jesus appeared to many witnesses over the span of forty days: to the women at the tomb, to the two unnamed disciples walking on the road to Emmaus, to his followers gathered in a locked rooms (later joined by Thomas who had doubted) and to many others. After these forty days, Jesus makes one final appearance before he is lifted up into the clouds. According to the promises given to his followers, Jesus’s departure does not conclude the story but initiates the next chapter in a grand narrative about the salvation God makes possible and their role as witnesses to it.

On this second Sunday in the season of Easter, we begin our look into the purpose and nature of the church, using this story from before there was a church.

## *Read Acts 1:3-14*

The first clue that we find about the narrative going forward is given in verse 3, where Luke – the author of the gospel and this book of Acts – emphasizes the “convincing proofs” of the resurrection of Jesus. This will be critical as the disciples move out into the world and speak about Jesus, live according to his teaching, and demonstrate the life of his kingdom in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has been raised from the dead; everything that follows is based on this reality. The disciples will base their entire mission, their hopes, and their passions upon their conviction that God raised Jesus from the grave.

In verses 4 through 8, Jesus and the disciples engage in a dialogue. These are the only words Jesus speaks in the book of Acts, so they are of special importance. Jesus begins with an instruction for the disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they receive the Holy Spirit. As Jesus had been anointed at his baptism with the Holy

Spirit, so his followers were now to be similarly anointed and enabled to carry on his work. This would be the work of witness-bearing.<sup>1</sup>

The term “witness” has become weighted with much Christian history. But the Greek term behind it – *martys* – which became such a big part of our tradition is built on the plainer meaning of the term, which is to be a truth-teller, especially for one testifying in court.

After Jesus had been sentenced to a criminal’s death and executed by the Romans, these apostles are recruited to testify and set the record straight about Jesus was all about. Their power to tell the truth would challenge those who preferred to advance a lie for their own agenda; to complicate the narrative of an empire that proclaimed peace and security while wielding lethal violence, especially against people of lower status. Jesus redirects the disciples from getting overwhelmed by what was outside of their control and leads them to anticipate the power that would be in their control for transforming the world into what it could and should be.<sup>2</sup>

The power Jesus promises will come from God. This power will have a purpose: to make these ordinary people into Jesus’s witnesses across the Roman world; starting in Jerusalem, the city they were visiting; to the outlying regions of Judea, the places where they came from and were comfortable being; to Samaria and their neighbors with whom they had disagreements and misunderstandings; and then to the ends of the earth, to people they did not know and were likely very different from them.

Jesus’s ascension does not mean the immediate arrival of the fullness of God’s kingdom or the realization of all God’s intentions for humanity’s well-being. But it also does not mean the cessation of Jesus’s ministry nor the suspension of God’s activity to set the world free from all kinds of oppression. Fulfillment will come, but after a period of waiting.

The time for looking at the sky in wonder has ended, the disciples are told. But the first great act of the apostles, the first step in the church’s formation, is to walk back to Jerusalem and to wait there. “Waiting for God to act,” says Robert Wall (no relation), “is a community project. Waiting with others is an act of solidarity with friends. The apostles do not scatter and go their separate ways to

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<sup>1</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, the New International Commentary on the New Testament series.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy L. Williams from *WorkingPreacher.com*

await a private, Spirit-filling or personal experience of divine faithfulness. They ‘were joined together’ in a specific place to await God’s action on them all.”<sup>3</sup>

Waiting often proves wise when people are trying to make sense of where and how God is accompanying them. Waiting reminds us of our dependence on God and the limitations of our ability to see and know God. By waiting together, Jesus’s followers begin to learn that they need to be a responsive community that waits upon God to initiate. The waiting period trains them to be available and attentive so they might respond as witnesses when the time comes.

To many of us, waiting to make a decision or to put a plan into action is a frustrating thing to do because it feels like indecision, weakness, or wasted time. Once you start waiting, how do you know when it’s time to stop?

Our denomination holds a particular reputation for being deliberative. We have neither an episcopal system: where bishops or other leaders offer top-down directives; nor do we operate by a purely congregational system: where members make all decisions from the bottom up. Instead, we elect representatives from among our lay and clergy members to function as decision-making bodies – called sessions in congregations – as well as in regional presbyteries and synods and in our national body. These governing boards are called to discern the church’s direction in prayer and with deliberation; acting, as we call it, *decently and in order*.

We function as a church through these processes and procedures because we believe in the core function of being witnesses: we seek to be truth-tellers. We do not take lightly the telling of the story of Jesus: his teachings and ministry, his death and resurrection. We pray deliberately about how to best communicate the message of salvation. We think seriously about how we are being called to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit to live with love, kindness, and mercy; always looking towards justice and peace to emerge as the fruit of the kingdom of God.

Waiting isn’t always the best course of action; there are moments when the urgency to act compels us to respond in the here and now. When people are hungry or unhoused, when they are sick, in prison, or oppressed we are called to respond with the leading and in the power of the Holy Spirit. As a mission-minded congregation, the members here are no strangers to compelling witness through hands-on generosity and powerful presence.

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted by Sharon Betsworth in *WorkingPreacher.com*

But in the beginning of Acts, there's nothing else these people can do. For them, it's part of learning to be a disciple. And so, they do what Jesus instructs them to do: return to Jerusalem and, together, await the Spirit's coming to direct them about what is next.

As we see in this book of Acts, the disciples will be formed by the Spirit as witnesses. They will be turned out to the world as those who will announce what Willie James Jennings has called a "revolution of the intimate." They will enter new places to become new people by joining themselves to people in Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

Many of us remember the childhood lesson: *This is the church, this is the steeple, open the doors, and see all the people.* In a story from before there was a church, Jesus instructs his followers on what these people in congregations will be like: they are to become witnesses, to be truth-tellers about his life, his teachings, his resurrection from the dead, and his kingdom that we – in the power of the Holy Spirit – will help to usher in. The specific shape of this kingdom is not pre-determined. It will grow organically as disciples – then and now – wait upon God, pray, and respond to the prompting of the Spirit.

We believe that, in this kingdom, disciples are gathered as congregations: discerning and working together to change the world around us as we, ourselves, are transformed ever more into the likeness of Christ, who is the head of the church. Congregations can come in many forms, but their function is to always be the same: proclaiming and giving witness to God's message of acceptance and salvation for all.

In the meal that we share today, we both remember the sacrifice of Jesus for all, which allows us to truth-tellers, and we are fed for the often unknown road the lies ahead as we are sent into the world. May we, as the church, be strengthened in resolve by this meal and, as we wait, pray to be sent out to share the good news of God's love for the world. Amen.

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<sup>44</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts from Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*