

RCL: [Acts 1:6-14](#), [1 Peter 4:12-14](#); [5:6-11](#), [Psalm 68:1-10](#), [33-36](#), [John 17:1-11](#)

Acts 1:6-14

When the apostles had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

Opening Prayer |

O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Context of Acts chapter 1

Written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, the book of Acts is addressed to "Theophilus," a "beloved of God," who might have been Luke's patron or a new convert undergoing instruction in the Christian faith. Although the book is entitled "The Acts of the Apostles," the central actor in this dramatic story is the Holy Spirit, who, soon after Jesus's ascension, empowers the apostles to cast aside their fears and share the good news of Christ's resurrection, even in the face of persecution, imprisonment, and violence. The book's opening chapter serves as a bridge from the conclusion of Jesus's earthly ministry to the founding days of the Church. It chronicles a final conversation between the apostles and Jesus, in which they ask him if the time has come for him to restore the

kingdom to Israel. Jesus redirects their political aspirations, commissioning them instead to become his witnesses, not only in Jerusalem, but to Judea, Samaria, and "the ends of the earth." He then ascends, concluding his earthly ministry, and the apostles, along with other early followers of Jesus, regather in the upper room in Jerusalem, to devote themselves to prayer as they await the promised coming of the Holy Spirit.

Theological Reflection |

Forty days have elapsed since the resurrection. During this period, Jesus had appeared to his friends several times. He has called Mary Magdalene by name at the empty tomb, revealed himself to Cleopas and his companion on the Emmaus Road, offered a skeptical Thomas the testimony of his scars, and prepared breakfast on a beach for the disgraced Peter. At this point in the story, over 400 people have seen the Risen Christ with their own eyes, and the apostles are convinced: **He is back. He is alive. He is with them. Surely then, the bulk of their journey is over. So with hopeful hearts, they voice the burning question: Are we there yet? Has the time come at last when you will free your people? (from the tyranny of Rome?** And bring in everlasting peace) Is this when our suffering ends and our vindication arrives?

Jesus's response? That's not the pertinent question. **You still have a long way to go, and the path that lies ahead is quite different from the one you expected** when you began. Jesus goes on to describe the path the apostles are actually on: **"You will receive power. You will receive the Holy Spirit.** You will become my witnesses both here and far away from here – all the way to the ends of the earth." And then, even as these words are still on his lips, he leaves them. And the disciples, who truly thought the hard part was over, find themselves staring into an empty sky, wondering what in the world has happened.

In the tradition of the Church, Jesus's ascension is recognized as good news. It's not that Jesus leaves humanity behind. It's that Jesus, the incarnate and embodied Son of God, carries all of creation with him into God's eternal presence. In the ascension, Jesus takes humanity home.

To be clear, the disciples are not *wrong* to hunger for justice for their people. **They don't realize that their hunger is too small. They don't yet understand that God's vision of justice isn't content to stop at the liberation of a single nation.** In fact, it will not stop until it restores all of creation. But of course, **this means the journey will be longer, slower, and messier than any of us would wish.**

In his ascension, Jesus invites us, his followers, to experience his presence in new ways. To believe that the next phase of their journey will be beautiful—even if we experience it as risky or strange. Most of all, he asks us to trust him—to **trust that his love will see us**

through every change, every challenge, every loss, and every heartbreak we'll ever face.

The disciples were in transition. The life that they had known with Jesus in the flesh had ended. Now they were in that in-between stage of waiting and praying for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. As they met together, they must have faced the grief of letting go of the life they once had. During such transitional times, grief and sadness are often experienced just below the surface. Consequently, they must have had a chance to grow in a deeper understanding of each other. (I can only imagine that each took on a different task. For example: One person might have felt the grief and anxiety for the whole group, another spent time comforting the grievers, another may have taken over the daily routines, while yet another goes into a sort of parody of "being in control of the situation.) Some were active while others were passive. **This environment is where spiritual gifts begin to surface.**

It is not incidental that the apostles are instructed, following the ascension, to go back to the Upper Room, to remain together in the bonds of love, and to pray. This space was an important period of emptiness or fallow time between an ending and a new beginning. The benefit of reviewing your **experiences of endings is seeing how often they have cleared the way for unexpected beginnings.** Likewise, the disciples are called, in the aftermath of the ascension, to become a profoundly responsive community: a community that doesn't rush ahead. **This community doesn't depend on its own strength and intelligence, but rather patiently waits on God.** As a fledgling church on the cusp of many new things, the apostles are taught to continue the journey of faith with fresh courage, resilience, and hope. To do so, they need to hold sacred the enormous trust Jesus has placed in them to become his witnesses, trusting that, even when the journey feels long, they are held in his loving embrace.

Reflection Questions |

What are the events that have brought change into your life in the past year? Categories to consider:

1. Losses of relationships
2. Changes in home life
3. Personal changes, such as getting sick, job changes
4. Work and financial changes: changes within your organization at work, getting fired, retiring, or changing jobs
5. Inner changes: Spiritual awakening, deepening social and political awareness, psychological insights.

Note: Each of the above changes has a corresponding stress score. And your health can often decline after a season of major stress.

- Jesus invites his apostles to trust in the Holy Spirit rather than hope for political change. How might this redirection help us to navigate the political and cultural moment we occupy?
- After Jesus's ascension, the apostles kept gazing after him until they were instructed to move on. Do you ever spend time looking backward, pining for what has been, instead of moving ahead in your journey of faith? How might we peel our eyes off the sky and face the road ahead?
- Where and how is God calling you to be a witness?

Faith in Practice |

After the ascension, the apostles are instructed to gather in community and devote themselves quite intentionally to prayer as they await the coming of the Holy Spirit. Consider gathering with a small group of fellow Christians to pray regularly for the Spirit in patience and mutual discernment. Commit to waiting on God together for a season, and see what happens. Start this week.