

Acts 1:1-14

So many things seem “off” right now. The routines and activities that usually occupy our schedules have been disrupted by the Coronavirus. Our days are spent sheltering in place within the safety of our homes. When we venture out for a doctor’s visit or groceries, we have to put on facemasks and do our best to stay six feet away from other people.

Even our lectionary seems “off” this year. Jesus has barely risen from the grave, but instead of listening a story about doubting Thomas this Sunday, we just heard about Jesus’ ascension into heaven.

Throughout the Easter season, our Scripture readings will come from the Book of Acts. It may seem like we’re skipping part of the story, however, I believe these readings are exactly what we need to hear right now. They show us what it looks like when the Easter message takes shape in a Christian community. Exploring the challenges and achievements of the early church will help us discern how we’re called to share the good news about Jesus Christ in this time and place.

The Book of Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. It tells the story of how Jesus followers answered his call to be witnesses in

Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the world. The official name of the book is, The Acts of the Apostles, but a better title would be, The Acts of the Holy Spirit. That's because Acts is the story of how the Holy Spirit empowered ordinary people like you and me to embrace their role in God's redemptive mission to the world.

Luke begins this book by telling us that, after his resurrection, Jesus had many face-to-face meetings with his disciples. During this forty-day period, Jesus ate meals with his disciples and taught them about the kingdom of God. He also instructed them not to leave Jerusalem until they received the promise of the Father.

I don't think that the disciples knew what to expect from this promise, however, their final conversation with Jesus gives us an idea of what they hoped it meant. Luke tells us that while they were standing on the Mount of Olives, the disciples asked Jesus, "Master, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? Is this the time?" (The Message) This question shows us that Jesus' disciples were still waiting for him to return Israel to the glory days of David.

This question makes me want to roll my eyes at the disciples and wonder why they just don't get it. You'd think after observing Jesus perform countless miracles during his ministry, witnessing his death

and resurrection, and spending the last forty days listening to him teach about the kingdom of God, they would have a better understanding of the kind of Messiah Jesus came to be.

We can roll our eyes at the disciple's question, but I wonder...how has Jesus' death and resurrection affected us? Does it inform the way we see God at work in the world...the church ...our lives? How has the good news that God put on flesh to die for our sins and defeated death by rising from dead reshape our expectations and imaginations? Are we open to the ways that God is at work in our current situation? Or are we like the disciples...stuck in our old ways and mindset?

As Followers of Jesus, we are called to live in response to the gift of life that Jesus provided through his death and resurrection. We do this by loving one another the way that Jesus loves us and by responding to people's needs with compassion and grace. We do this by letting go of our personal preferences and preconceived ideals, and allowing the Holy Spirit to reshape our expectations and imaginations so we can be witnesses to the world.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told the disciples that they didn't get to know the Father's restorative timeline. He also said that the Father would give them the Holy Spirit, who would empower them

to be his witnesses throughout the world. This is the same Spirit that we received at our baptisms. It's the Spirit who calls us through the Gospel, enlightens us with his gifts, keeps us in the one true faith and shapes our lives to become more and more like Jesus.

The disciples returned to Jerusalem to shelter in place while they waited for the promise of the Father. But did you notice something? Their experience is quite different from when they hid in fear behind locked doors after Jesus' crucifixion. That's because Easter has a way of changing our behavior and perspective. Luke tells us that while they waited for the Father's promise, they "agreed they were in this for good, completely together in prayer." (Acts 1: 14 The Message) In other words, while Jesus' followers sheltered in place, they spent their time praying together and studying God's promises in the Scriptures so they would be able to recognize them when they were fulfilled.

Waiting is hard. If we didn't realize this five weeks ago...we most certainly realize it now. In the church, waiting is usually associated with Advent. But this year it seems particularly appropriate for the Easter season. Easter reminds us that in Jesus Christ, God has overcome sin and death. There is nothing in this world or the next that can separate us from the unconditional and everlasting love of our heavenly Father.

Easter also invites us to be curious about what God is up to in this unsettling and uncertain time. As we wait to discover how this pandemic situation will come to an end, we have the opportunity to seek God's guidance on how we can embrace our baptismal call to "bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world." (ELW p231) This word declares that God is more powerful than any virus or political system our world may create. It declares that in Jesus Christ, God says "yes" to life and "no" to death. It reminds us that God is in the process of restoring our world to a place of wholeness, and invites us to embrace our role in making this good news known.

Brothers and sisters, we are called to be Jesus' witnesses to God's redemptive work to the people in our families, community and world. In order to be a witness in a trial of law, all you need to know is one piece of information that pertains to the case. I wonder...what is one thing that you know about the way God is at work in our world? I encourage you to share this knowledge with someone you know this week. And trust that the Holy Spirit will use it to bring them comfort and hope as they shelter in place. Amen.