

Waiting for the Promise Acts 1:1-14

Waiting is hard, isn't it? We want to get back to work. We want to visit with family and friends. We want to worship together instead of just in front of our computer screens. But instead we wait. We wonder how long it will be before the state allows groups of more than ten people to gather indoors. We wonder how long it will take before a vaccine for this virus can be developed, or when effective treatments for it will finally be discovered. We wonder and we wait.

And if you think about it, that's the same sort of thing Jesus was asking His disciples to do in the first chapter of Acts, isn't it? Yes, verse 2 says that Jesus had already commanded them to proclaim the good news about Him – they knew what they had to do. But in verse 4, He specifically told them that before they charged off into ministry, they should wait for the promise He had given them from the Father.

But hadn't they already been in training for quite some time? According to most theologians, Jesus spent about 3 years with His disciples, teaching them and showing them His miracles. And the background to our responsive reading from Luke's gospel reminds us that the disciples had already been sent out two-by-two on a mission trip, to proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah, and to heal people and cast out demons in His name.

Moreover, Acts chapter 1 verse 3 tells us that it had been 40 days since Jesus had risen from the dead – to put that into perspective, this Thursday marks 40 days since Easter Sunday. In our safer-at-home, socially-isolated world, that seems like an eternity ago, doesn't it? Yes, it had been forty days since the disciples had known that Jesus had risen from the dead, forty days since it had become obvious that He is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. Surely by this time they had been prepared to start their ministry of evangelism. So, why did they need to keep on waiting?

Well, let's think about our own situation. Most of us have known the basic truths of the gospel for a lot longer than 40 days. Maybe you came to an awareness of the claims of Christ at one of your first Christmases, when your parents told you that we give gifts to one another because the Father gave the Christ child to us. Or maybe it was on a sunny Easter morning, after you and your friends had found all the eggs on the playground, when your Sunday School teacher explained that, sort of like when a chick comes out of its shell, Jesus walked out of His tomb so that we might have the hope of the Resurrection someday. Or maybe it was at Vacation Bible School when you were painting and decorating a wooden cross when you realized just how great was the price that Jesus paid for all who trust in Him. To be honest, I don't remember the first time I heard the story of Jesus, and you probably don't either. We know a lot about Jesus, and we've known it for a long time.

So, why haven't we been more active in ministry over these last forty days? No, we can't do as much in-person visiting as we would like. But our calendars have been a lot clearer than they normally are. So we have had plenty of time to make phone calls or send emails or even mail old-fashioned written notes with stamps on them. So, why haven't we been more intentional about reaching out, about sharing our faith?

Could it be that we've allowed the circumstances of our lives to weaken that faith? Sure, we know all the right things about Jesus – we even recite those things to one another every time we say the

Apostles' Creed. But when the chips are down, when the going gets tough, do we really trust Him? Do we really live as if He has risen from the dead, as if His Resurrection has delivered us from bondage to sin and death? And if the Resurrection isn't real enough to us to make a difference in our own lives, how can we hope to explain it to others?

No, I think we can understand why the disciples needed those forty days. As verse 3 says, Jesus needed that time to drive home the fact of His Resurrection to them, to provide convincing proofs to them, to appear to them in different places in different ways, to explain more of how He would continue to fulfill the great truths of the Kingdom of God.

And they needed that reinforcement of the truth, they needed those convincing proofs for the same reason that we do – because remaining faithful to Jesus was going to be very hard for them. After all, each one of them would eventually be faced with the choice of denying the Divinity and the Resurrection of Christ on the one hand, or losing their lives on the other. And because of those forty days, because Jesus had left them absolutely no doubt that He had not only risen from the dead but also ascended into Heaven, each and every one of them eventually made the same choice. Although none of them had been willing to die *with* Him, every one of them became willing to die *for* Him. It turned out that their forty days of waiting, their forty days of meditating on the truth of the Resurrection of Christ was a key component of their preparation for ministry.

Could the same thing be true for us? If we want to have a strong faith, a vibrant faith, a contagious faith, maybe we also need to turn away from the fears and distractions of the world and spend more time reading about and thinking about Who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us. Maybe if we turn our eyes upon Jesus and look full in His wonderful face the things of earth really will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. And maybe then our testimony to Him will become as compulsive for us as it will be compelling for others.

But even that wasn't enough for the disciples. For once they knew that they knew that Jesus really is the Risen Son of God, they still weren't ready for ministry. They still needed to wait a bit longer, as Jesus commanded them to do in verse 4. So, what did they do during this second period of waiting? What did they do during the 10 days after Jesus ascended into Heaven?

Well, what does verse 14 tell us? "They continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." It turns out that it wasn't enough for them to have a correct intellectual knowledge of the truths about Jesus. It wasn't even enough for them to be certain of His bodily Resurrection from the dead. No, they had to draw close to Him in prayer. They had to seek His face regularly and earnestly.

And that's because, quite frankly, the job Jesus was sending them to do was impossible for any mere human being to accomplish. For think about it – according to verse 8, the first place He was sending them to proclaim the good news about Him was to Jerusalem. That's where all the religious leaders lived who had conspired against Him. That's where all the Roman soldiers were stationed who had nailed Him to the cross. So, as far as the disciples knew, if they were to proclaim publicly in Jerusalem that they were followers of Jesus, they would end up being crucified in the same way that He was.

And then, Jesus told them He was sending them to Judea. But Jesus had spent the last 3 years teaching the Jewish people and displaying His miracles to them, only to have them turn their backs on

Him on Good Friday. So, how could His disciples have expected to be able to change their minds? If the Jews hadn't believed Jesus was the Messiah before He died, why should they believe His disciples' testimony to His Resurrection?

And then, Jesus told them He was sending them to Samaria. But the Samaritans and the Jews had hated each other for hundreds and hundreds of years. And all the disciples were Jews. So, no matter how certain they were about the Divinity and the Resurrection of Jesus, how could they reasonably expect the Samaritans to listen to what they had to say?

Finally, Jesus told them He was sending them to the remotest parts of the earth. But they didn't speak any foreign languages, so how could they possibly communicate the truths of the gospel to such strange people? How could they possibly hope for any ministry success where Jesus Himself hadn't gone to blaze the trail for them?

No, when Jesus ascended into Heaven in verse 9, He left His disciples in the same condition as when He had told them to feed those 5000 hungry families in our responsive reading – they were just overwhelmed. No matter how great their confidence had been as they had returned from their first mission trip, no matter how many miracles they had recently performed in His name, there was no way they could feed thousands and thousands of people with five dinner rolls and a few sardines.

And maybe that's how you feel today. Maybe this crazy COVID crisis has you at the end of your rope. Maybe you just don't know how much longer you can keep trusting in God's protection and provision in the face of so much scary news. Maybe you feel just as overwhelmed as those disciples did when they faced that hungry crowd. Maybe you feel so empty yourself that you don't see how you can possibly encourage or help anyone else.

But even if your faith is strong, maybe you're just as hesitant to share it as those disciples were. Maybe you have some close friends or family members who need to know Christ or know Him better, but you don't know how to strike that delicate balance, saying what they need to hear about our common need for a Savior without having them cut the lines of communication, tuning you out. Maybe you can't figure out where the line is between showing love to people who have made bad choices on the one hand and enabling them to keep on making those choices on the other. No matter how much you know about Jesus, no matter how convinced you may be that He is really the answer to all our problems, you just don't have a clue about what to say or when to say it.

So, maybe we all need the same thing those disciples needed after Jesus ascended into Heaven – not just to be more fully convinced of what we know about Jesus, but to draw closer to Him in prayer. For if we want to bear a fuller, a more complete witness to Jesus with our lips as well as our lives, if we want people to believe us when we say that Jesus is truly risen, they'll need to see Him in us.

And that brings us to the last and most important reason that the disciples needed to wait a little longer before embarking on their ministry. For if they needed to fill their minds as much as possible with the reality of who Jesus is, and if they needed to draw close as they could to Him in prayer, they also needed to be filled with Christ Himself, in the Person of His Holy Spirit. For isn't that what Jesus told them in verse 5? They didn't just need to be baptized with water, making a public confession of faith in Christ and taking their stand as a member of God's covenant family. No, they also needed to

be baptized with the Holy Spirit, filled with Christ Himself if they were to be able to bear effective witness to Him.

For think back again to our responsive reading, the time when Jesus asked His disciples to perform the impossible task of feeding those 5000 families. They did end up doing that, didn't they? They did hand out enough bread and fish to feed everyone – but only because Jesus was first giving the food to them. It was really Jesus Who performed the miracle – they were just serving the tables with the food He kept multiplying. It was His power that really mattered, not theirs.

And the same thing is true for us. If we try to fulfill all our responsibilities in our own strength, if we try to master our boredom and fear by ourselves, if we try to come up with our own winsome words to tell other people about Jesus, we will be nothing more than miserable failures. No matter how much we may know about Jesus, there's just no way we can love others just as much and in the same way that He loves us. There's no way we can tell the truth about Him in a compelling way, there's no way we can truly reveal the character of Christ unless He Himself is living within us.

So, while we wait for our lives to get back to whatever will become normal in the days to come, why don't we do what those disciples did? Why don't we meditate on the wonderful truths we've learned about Jesus – His life, His death, His Resurrection and His Ascension? Why don't we draw close to Him in prayer, seeking His will in everything we do? And why don't we pray fervently that God would fill us anew and afresh with His Holy Spirit? For that's the only way we can ever hope to show Christ to the world.