

Why Do You Stand Here?
Acts 1:1-11
May 8, 2016

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed 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 and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Usually, when we hear today’s reading from the first chapter of Acts, our attention goes to the promise of verse 11: *This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven* (Ac 1:11 ESV). That’s a great promise. It’s wonderful to know that Jesus is coming back to take all his children home to be with him.

However, today we are going to look at the question that proceeds that promise: *Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?* (Ac 1:11 ESV). Of course, that is a rhetorical question. It’s a question that doesn’t expect an answer.

It’s similar to when God was walking through the Garden of Eden and asked: “*Where are you, [Adam]?*” (Ge 3:9). God didn’t want to know where Adam was, he already knew that. He wanted Adam to think about the predicament he was in.

In the same way, the angels, who asked the disciples why they were looking into heaven, didn’t want an answer. They wanted the disciples to realize they weren’t following Jesus’ orders.

The disciples had just received their marching orders from the resurrected Lord. The angels were asking, “Why aren’t you doing what you’re supposed to be doing?”

It might help us to know to whom the angels were speaking. It probably wasn’t just the eleven disciples. Scripture tells us that between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension he appeared to over 500 of his followers. The group on the Mount of Olives that day might have been quite large. We must never think that Jesus’ orders were just for a few people of that day.

Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Picture

yourself on the Mount of Olives that day. Jesus has just ascended into heaven and someone says, “Okay, nothing more to see here. Let’s head home.” I don’t think so. But that is what was expected of them.

As much as the disciples might have wanted to stay, they have been told to leave the “mountain top” and return to Jerusalem. God places great importance on obedience. The word “obey”, and its various forms, appears 169 times in the ESV translation of Scripture.

The prophet Samuel told King Saul: *To obey is better than sacrifice* (1 Sam 15:22 ESV). Also, listen to what Moses told the Israelites before they crossed into the Promised Land: *See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known* (Dt 11:26-28 ESV).

After the disciples arrived back in Jerusalem, what were they supposed to do? According to the text: *He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me”* (Ac 1:4 ESV).

How many people do you know that enjoying waiting. Waiting is one of the hardest things for people to master. Not only do we not enjoy waiting – we hate waiting. Have you ever been fooled into thinking that the self-serve checkout lanes in the grocery store are going to be quicker? They’re quick – until there’s a problem. Then you wait for the one cashier who’s attending to eight checkout lanes.

Verse six of the reading says: *So when [the disciples] had come together, they asked [Jesus], “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”* (Ac 1:6 ESV). The disciples weren’t in the mood to wait. They were ready for the Kingdom to come. The tragedy of Good Friday was over. The victory of Easter Sunday had taken place. So, they must have figured, what are we waiting for?

Jesus’ answer to them is for us also: *It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority* (Ac 1:7 ESV). God values obedience and patience. God didn’t need the disciples to do his thinking and planning for him, and he doesn’t need us for that either. Our job is simply to do as he instructs us.

So what did the disciples do with all this waiting time? They did the same thing we should be doing while we wait on the Lord. They got busy. If you read on to verses 13 and 14, you see they held a prayer meeting: *When they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas*

the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers (Ac 1:13-14 ESV).

We know that they were going to wait for ten days, but they didn't know that. In the absence of knowing how long to wait, they did the right thing. They committed themselves to prayer and obedience. They hunkered down and just waited for God to make the next move.

That also works for us today. The best thing to do, while God has you waiting, is just to pray and wait. He'll come through in his time.

However, the disciples didn't just sit on their hands for the next ten days. Even while we wait there's work to be done. The remainder of chapter one of Acts tells us they busied themselves searching Scripture for an answer for what to do about the absence of Judas Iscariot. When they found the solution, they elected Matthias to take his place. They held the first church business meeting. They carried on the work of the church while they waited on God.

Let's take a look at the actual orders Jesus gave those disciples, because they're our orders, too. Jesus said: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*

(Ac 1:8 ESV).

The Greek word for witness is (martus). It's also where English derives its word martyr. A martyr is someone who is very serious about the nature of his or her mission – serious enough to make sacrifices to succeed in that mission.

A witness is someone who is called on to tell the truth. What is asked of witnesses in a courtroom proceeding? "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" Our job, as witnesses, or martyrs, for Jesus, is to unflinchingly tell the whole Truth of God's Gospel. The real Truth. The important Truth. The only Truth that matters.

So how does all of this connect to us here at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in the year 2016? What might God want us to see in Luke's account of Christ's ascension?

It's important to understand that we are in the same position as those first disciples. The disciples waited for the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit came. We have been given that same Holy Spirit. After they had been anointed by the Holy Spirit they got busy spreading the Gospel. We need to be just as busy. For the rest of their lives they waited for Jesus to return, and we are still waiting.

The fact that Jesus has not returned yet says something very important. It tells us that the job is not finished. While we wait for our Savior, we need to be about the work of the church, the work of seeking out the lost.

If all we do is plop down in our pews every Sunday and wait for Jesus to return, we're only doing half the job we have been given. Jesus did just say wait. He also said we are to be his witnesses, his martyrs.

There are over four billion people, outside of the walls of this church, who are on the fast track to hell. Every moment we waste not carrying out our Lord's commands, someone descends into eternal damnation. This is no time to be standing around looking into the sky for Jesus to return.

Evangelism isn't just for missionaries and pastors. Evangelism is the assignment of every Christian. Every Christian, who carries the Good News of the Gospel to even one of God's lost children, will someday here Jesus say: *Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master* (Mt

25:23 ESV).