

Acts 1:6-14 - NRSVUE

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, as well as his brothers.

Unstuck and On a Mission

I was listening to an old podcast of CBC’s Tapestry, Mary Hines interviewing John O’Donohue (wonderful interview: he’s a former priest and a poet) and O’Donohue told this little hypothetical story. He wondered what would happen if we could talk to a baby before they were born (maybe a particularly astute baby!) and tell them that soon they are going to feel immense pressure, go through a passageway where it feels like they might suffocate and die, and then emerge into this intensely bright, loud, and cold place. Soon after the cord that connects them to their mother’s life support system will be cut, and they would be forever separate from their mother. From then on, they would continue on a journey essentially on their own, without a map, where anything might happen to them. “Well,” he said, “we might understand if the baby thinks this all sounds awful, like the end of all things good.”

The feast of the Ascension was this past Thursday. Forty days after Easter, after Jesus has risen from the dead, the disciples witness Jesus being taken up into the clouds. I really love this passage of scripture because there’s so much good stuff in it. It begins with Jesus still with the disciples. The confusion and the total shock of the resurrection of Jesus has worn off. They believe it now. He’s back! And you can imagine the incredible relief and sense of “Sigh, finally everything wrong is right!” One of the disciples asks Jesus **“So, when are you going to restore the kingdom of Israel?”** In other words — when are you going to make our world right again?

We have to be careful when we hear these words of the disciples because we can't help but hear them within our present context. Fundamentalist and evangelical Christians in the U.S. take some of these words literally, to mean that somehow the establishment of the state of Israel is tied up in a holy destiny of God. A lot of harm, even evil has been done because of this linking of Israel to a religious status that places them above all other people — especially Arab and Palestinian people.

And when the disciples ask about Israel, they are partly dipping back into what they *thought* the purpose of the Messiah — the Chosen One of God — was supposed to be. Remember when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and they hail him 'the King of Jews'? There is a nationalism — a desire for Israel to throw off their Roman oppressors and occupiers and once again be a nation and a people who matter — so much so that people like the Queen of Sheba will come and seek wisdom from them. They were remembering a time when things were far better. There is both a specific context for them with the Roman occupation, but also you can hear it as symbolic. "When are you going to restore Israel?" also means "When is everything going to be made right? Isn't that why you came back to life?"

Not only does Jesus not answer their question in any way that makes sense — he leaves! Before their eyes he is taken up in the clouds to heaven and they are left behind. In their last big mystical experience, some of them were on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured and a cloud from God descended. They were enveloped in that cloud *with Jesus*, and they heard the voice of God. This time they are left out and left standing on the ground looking up, probably thinking "Well frig! Now what?"

You gotta feel for these disciples— they've been through a lot in the last 3 years, from the highs of "We've found the Messiah!" and "Just listen to him teach, so much authority!" to the confusion: "Wait ... why is he talking and eating with those people?!" and then the utter devastation: "Hell's bells! He's been arrested and killed. It can't be true ... but it is. It's over." Then back to confusion with the rumours from the women that He's alive, to pure joy: "He really is alive! He's back! All is well. You had us scared, but all will be restored." And then to this point where they are standing there, stuck, and disoriented again: "What do you mean you're leaving?! Omg, there he goes!"

It's a little bit like telling an infant in the womb what is coming next. I think if we could have told the disciples all that they were going to go through after they decided to follow Jesus, well it might not have sounded like such a great gig. It might have sounded pretty awful.

So you can understand in all of the drama why the disciples are just standing there, standing still. Almost stuck to the ground, staring up at where they had seen Jesus enveloped and carried away in a cloud. I'd be stuck too. Sometimes I still am.

What was going on in that moment when they were standing still, stuck in place, looking up? I see it as a moment of longing and yearning. Almost a homesickness. It's a moment of longing for what was — for the security they had when Jesus was with them. During all the drama and the adventure they'd had in the last three years, there was a security and stillness in the middle of all they did. That security and stillness came from being in a relationship with and belonging to Jesus. He was their anchor, their North Star. It was a bit early for nostalgia, but their grief and longing for what was felt a bit like nostalgia.

There was so much in that moment — a moment in time, but heavier and deeper in quality. They were lost and stuck at the same time, maybe homesick for something they had tasted and wanted more of. Have you ever been there? Longing, yearning, homesick? I feel like I'm longing, yearning and homesick for a pre-pandemic world that seemed saner, kinder, more civilized, and predictable than how things seem now.

The **problem with nostalgia**, or longing for what was, is that we have a tendency to romanticize how things were — sometimes it's more our perception than it is reality. You remember the Black Lives Matter movement that erupted early on in the pandemic. It's not that there was less racism before, it's that we weren't paying attention until George Floyd was killed by the police officer kneeling on his neck while the others stood by. The protests that erupted caused us to look.

It's not that things were wonderful in Gaza before the October 7th attack on Israel. This Wednesday marks 76 years since Palestinians were displaced in the *Nakba*, the Catastrophe. Almost overnight 700,000 Palestinians became refugees. Things are horrific now, but it's not like things were wonderful before. We just weren't paying attention to the occupation and the injustices until now. So nostalgia can be a bit deceptive. Sometimes we are longing for a less disruptive world for us at the expense of a more just and loving world for all.

There is a deception to that yearning, that homesickness — but there is also a **truth**. I believe that we yearn for what is deep inside us. We were made in the image of God. As Paul says in Ephesians *“For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”* Eph 2:10

Back to our disciples who are stuck in a moment and could very well have stayed stuck. Many people stay stuck. How do they get unstuck? By the grace of God. Two angels walk up to them and ask them “Why are you standing there gawking?! He's going to come back.” The angels basically tell them that it's time to move on. It's time to stop mourning and yearning for what was — it's time to get to work!

And they do. Remember when they asked Jesus if he was going to restore Israel? He doesn't answer them directly — he says something cryptic about the Father's time that no one knows, but then he says: *"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."* In other words, "Your vision is too small! I'm not just going to restore your world — I'm going to restore *the* world. And right now, you are how that's going to happen! You will be my hands and feet, you will be my witnesses, you will be my church."

I am grateful that there are still people who choose to follow Jesus. I am grateful to the many members and volunteers we have in this church who do so much to be the church, and I'm grateful for those who have professed and renewed their faith this morning and have chosen to continue their journey of faith through this particular church. Part of being a member is growing up and becoming responsible for your faith and for the sharing and acting out of that faith. When we choose to follow Jesus, we take off our bib and we put on an apron — and with the limitations and the gifts that are unique to each one of us, we get to work! Some of us have no business wearing an apron, but we can preach or pray, or make caring phone calls or organize or raise funds for God's work in the world.

This is the first chapter of the book of Acts. This is the beginning of the life of the church — and wow, do they ever get moving!

Next Sunday is Pentecost, which celebrates when the Holy Spirit falls on the disciples and they truly become the church. One thing I want you to notice is that the first action they take looks more like non-action. They retreat and pray. First, they pray, and then they move. **Action and contemplation.** Or as our banners put it (I will talk a bit about them next week) "De profundus" **Out of the Depths** and Extra Muros **Beyond the Walls**. Prayer and Action. As the United Church of Canada puts it "Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship, Daring Justice."

Jesus has left them in the physical, right-next-to-them kind of way, but the Holy Spirit comes, and they are far from alone.

Yes, if we could talk to a baby still in the womb and explain what was coming, we might understand if the baby thinks this all sounds awful and sounds like the end of all things good, but in fact it is the beginning of what the world will celebrate as their birth and the beginning of their life.

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven." This isn't the end. One day all will be restored, and until that time we will partner with God to bring goodness, healing and life to our hurting world. Thanks be to God. Amen.