

**Lauren Baske Davis**  
**Sermon on Acts 1:1-14**  
**What Happens After Easter?**

**The Message Translation** <sup>1-5</sup> *Dear Theophilus—(which means God-lover)—In the first volume of this book, I wrote on everything that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he said good-bye to the apostles, the ones he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven. After Jesus’ death, he presented himself alive to them in many different settings over a period of forty days. In face-to-face meetings, he talked to them about things concerning the kingdom of God. As they met and ate meals together, Jesus told them that they were on no account to leave Jerusalem but “must wait for what the Father promised: the promise you heard from me. John baptized in water; you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit. And soon.”* <sup>6</sup> *When they were together for the last time they asked, “Master, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? Is this the time?”* <sup>7-8</sup> *He told them, “You don’t get to know the time. Timing is the Father’s business. What you’ll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world.”* <sup>9-11</sup> *These were Jesus’ last words. As they watched, he was taken up and disappeared in a cloud. They stood there, staring into the empty sky. Suddenly two people appeared—in white robes! They said, “You Galileans!—why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly—and mysteriously—as he left.”* <sup>12-13</sup> *So they left the mountain called Olives and returned to Jerusalem. It was a little over half a mile. They went to the upper room they had been using as a meeting place: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James, son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas, son of James.* <sup>14</sup> *They agreed they were in this for good, completely together in prayer, the women included—and Jesus’ mother, Mary—and his brothers.*

**Sermon**

It’s funny sometimes, the details you notice in a text depending on your own location and context. If the opening verses of the book of Acts—wild as they are—aren’t fitting for our time, I don’t know what is. I can’t think, for example, of another place in the Bible where Jesus says to the disciples, that *under no circumstances are they to leave where they are*. They need to stay put. It’s fitting that we’re hearing these words in a time when we have been told that the greatest act of communal love in the time of pandemic is to stay put.

Oh, dear First UCC, this is so not where we imagined we would be and what we would be doing right now. Here we are on Zoom worship, through the wonders of technology. And of course we would rather be together, shoulder to shoulder, shaking hands, singing together, in faith formation together, drinking coffee and having treats together. And one day again, we will be. But not yet. Because right now the best thing—the most loving thing—we can do for everyone is stay put and be apart, physically. It is one great act of communal love.

The thing is, in our scripture, the disciples aren’t where they wish they could be, either. When Jesus called them to follow him, do you think they possibly thought they’d be on such a wild ride? That Jesus would be put to death was not all that surprising, given the brutality of the Roman empire’s occupation. But then in love, we are told, he rose from the grave. That was unexpected. And he didn’t just rise, he spent 40 days with the disciples after he was raised,

teaching them—and eating with them—our scripture says, as if to highlight Jesus' very human needs for food after resurrection.

Over the course of eating meals together, Jesus tells the disciples another funny detail. Not only must they stay put and not leave Jerusalem, *they must wait*. They need to stay put, and they need to wait. In this instance, they are to wait for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. "It'll come," Jesus says, "soon enough." For just a moment, it's as if we can feel what it might have been like to be one of Jesus' disciples. Staying put. Waiting.

Jesus appeared to the disciples many times, we're told, over those 40 days. (We'll be talking about one of those appearances next week!) But in our scripture scene today, there is a little more discussion, and then whoosh, just a few verses into the book of Acts, Jesus is gone. He ascends to heaven to be with God. This is not something our contemporary understandings easily grasp. We can discuss the particulars of the theology of ascension another day. Today, all of this is to say, that within a few verses of the opening of the book of Acts, Jesus is gone, off to be with God. He's not exactly gone, gone, but he's offstage somewhere.

So the disciples, do what Jesus asked. They all wait. Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas, son of James, women whose names are not mentioned, Jesus' brothers, and Mary Jesus' mother all walk down the Mount of Olives. Together, they go back to the upper room they'd rented in Jerusalem. To wait. And while they're waiting, they do this lovely thing. Our translation says, "They agreed they were in this for good, completely together in prayer, the women included. And Jesus' mother, Mary, and his brothers." They wait. And then they agree that they're in this together.

I don't know what you think of when you think of the disciples, but we know, mostly from the epistles—the letters in the New Testament—that people seeking to follow Jesus, the people of the early church, did not always get along. In fact, whole communities did not get along. They would argue over theology, they'd bicker because of their egos, they'd judge and try to punish one another. The disciples—this group that just decided in Acts a minute ago that they were in this together—also did not have a history of getting along.

The disciples had been together for a while by the point we meet them in Acts today. They had a history with one another, they'd probably fought, at times they were probably sick of each other, and they probably don't agree about every single point and they've all been through a journey as individuals and together. They probably didn't agree about their expectations of what would happen next, nor how they should respond. But these people are the people that Jesus called. This is the community that Jesus was building—a group of people that didn't look alike, people who had very different backgrounds, and ideas, who spoke different languages, and who were different genders. This is the beloved community that Jesus instructs to wait. The community that has to stay put and wait, not knowing what is to come next.

Except there is one clue that scholars note.<sup>1</sup> You see, scholars know that the author who wrote the book of Acts is also the one who wrote the Gospel of Luke. And they note one detail in the mentioning of the disciples. Though other women's names are not mentioned, one is: Mary, the mother of Jesus. If you'll remember back to the beginning, Mary is where Jesus' whole story starts in the gospel of Luke. Before Jesus is even born, it is Mary who sings the *Magnificat*: about the upheaval that comes with the kin-dom of God, where the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up. It is Mary, Jesus' mother, who sings about God filling the hungry with good things and scattering the proud.

So, when Mary is mentioned in this group of disciples after Jesus' ascension, scholars say, we are meant to go from the end of Jesus' story here and harken back to the very beginning of his story. We are meant to remember, through Mary, God is up to something. At the beginning, Mary had to wait. Pregnant with the son of God in-flesh, Jesus was going to be born through the least likely, a lowly unwed peasant girl. God was up to something then.

Now, that even as the disciples stay put, even as they wait, though Jesus isn't physically there anymore, God is still up to something. Mary prophetically sang about it, and Jesus lived it. With Mary there, we are to remember that God's heart is still and always with the lowly and the hungry, the sick and the afraid. So while the disciples all stay put and wait, while they decide that they're in this together, not knowing what would happen next, I wonder if they were centered around this arc of God's activity.

A friend and colleague was speaking with my husband Jon and me the other day. We talked about staying put in this time of pandemic. About waiting. About praying. About trying to stay healthy. This friend, who is also a minister in a congregation, talked about his young son who lives with severe seizures. And he said: "One of the lessons that [our son] taught [my wife] and me was that we had no control over his seizures and his health. We tried so many different drugs and treatments and yet there was nothing that seemed to work for over two years. He was near death several times—and we are so fortunate to still have him. It was during this time that we had to come face to face with waiting. I saw Tom Petty a couple of times in the 90s [and when he sang,] "the waiting is the hardest part," well, I still think about that line. It rings true for me." He went on to talk about his church: "Our staff has been hyperactive in its response to this current pandemic. It's been hard to see them struggle when their expectations of returning to 'normal' are continually being blown apart. I keep forcing myself to return to the moment and to be mindful of the day we have. I was thinking about the story of Jesus in the garden and the call to "wait with him..." All of these experiences for me have led me to believe that this is a period of waiting. I know that grief will come in waves, I know that our common life—economically, religiously, etc.—will be different, and I know that the Spirit somehow sustains us. So I am doing my best to be grateful for the gifts I have today, to advocate for those whose suffering is so great these days, and to wait as best I can. [And because our friend loves Wendell Berry, he said,] To paraphrase Wendell Berry, 'it's not the only way, but it's one way.'"

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Karoline Lewis and Matt Skinner at Luther Seminary for their words on the workingpreacher.org Sermon Brainwave podcast, and for Matt Skinner's [new book and video series on Acts](#).

So the disciples waited. They stayed the course, they decided they were in it together. They prayed, they cared for one another, and they waited for something to change. And despite vast differences in time and culture and context, in this time of pandemic, we wait. We stay the course. We decide we're in this together. We pray, we care for one another, we advocate, and we wait for something to change. Because it will. The disciples did not know what the future would hold. But remembering Jesus' last words about the Holy Spirit coming soon, remembering who they were and what God is about, they trusted, knowing that no matter what the **future** would hold, that God would be there.

It was true for them. May it be so for us, and forevermore. Amen.

Our hymn is *Now the Green Blade Riseth*, and I invite us all to sing....