

When Knowing Isn't Enough (Acts 1:1-11)

As Acts opens and Jesus returns to God in the ascension, we discover that the early church found itself in a difficult spot—especially when you consider that there **was** no early church at the ascension. But for our purposes, as a congregation asking questions about where it is that God is leading, that is ***precisely*** the point.

There was no early church at the opening of Acts—just a bunch of worried folks trying to figure out what to do next—hoping fervently that God had a plan, but just as afraid that things were about to spin out of control—***both*** of which, as we will learn—were true.

Acts is, therefore, the story about how the church learned—admittedly in fits and starts—about how to be the church.

So, to begin ... the ascension. I've got to tell you, it's pretty hard making homiletical hay out of the ascension. I mean, obviously, it's important. Otherwise, why would Luke close out his Gospel by talking about it while opening up his account of the early **church** with it?

Luke uses it as a literary bridge between the story of Jesus and the story of the early church, a transition from the ministry of **Jesus** to the ministry of Jesus' **followers**. In that sense, then, the ascension is a literary hinge joining two compelling narratives about the kingdom of God.

So, clearly Luke finds the story of Jesus ascending in a cloud a significant one. But, if we're honest, **why** Luke finds it so important is a little tough to figure out. None of the other Gospels give it any airtime. So, what's the big deal for Luke?

Well, he begins the book of Acts by giving a brief account of the time Jesus spent with the apostles after his resurrection

and before his ascension. Jesus gave instructions “through the Holy Spirit.”

What instructions did he give?

Luke doesn’t tell us, only that for “forty days” he was “speaking about the kingdom of God.”

The kingdom of God. You can imagine that the apostles would like a little more information about **that** one. They’d spent the better part of three years hoping that Jesus was going to preside over a political/military revolution that would oust the occupying Roman force and establish a **new** kingdom—or at least restore the old Judean one.

When Jesus’ followers **first** heard “kingdom of God,” they got hung up on the “kingdom” part. But then came Good Friday, shattering the dreams of all who believed that the **kingdom** Jesus spoke about would be concerned with

keeping a distinctly anti-Roman foreign policy, with the internal struggles over domestic policy and leveling the death-dealing legal and economic systems that kept 97% of the Palestinian population in poverty. The crucifixion, for all intents and purposes, blew up the disciples' grand plans of nation-building in the Middle East—even if it was only their own nation they had any interest in building.

But then came Easter, and what appeared to be lost on Friday seemed to be restored on Sunday. Resurrection went a long way toward putting the holy wind back in their sails.

The question, though, was what did resurrection ***mean*** in the larger scheme?

Assuming, as they did, that Jesus was more than just a resuscitated corpse, what were the larger implications of Easter?

Was Jesus raised from the dead to lead a military coup?

Were they finally going to get some satisfaction for the years of oppression by their Roman overlords?

Or, as Luke puts it in our text for this morning, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

And you can see the apostles' eyes begin to twinkle as the faded dreams of Jewish liberation start to regain some of their luster. We thought we knew what was going on, then Good Friday came and we knew we didn't know what Jesus had been talking about, but then Easter Sunday came and we thought, "Well, if death can't keep him down, maybe the Romans can't either."

For forty days, they hadn't figured out a way to broach the subject with Jesus, but here in the first chapter of Acts, just before Jesus takes off for the final time, the apostles finally

find the courage: “Lord, is **this** the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Is it time? Now? Tomorrow? We’d like a little help with the schedule of activities if you don’t mind. Couldn’t you just give us a hint so that we could stay one step ahead of the game? Some sort of timetable, maybe? I mean, how’s it going to look if your own pals are caught with their pants down when the kingdom is restored?

And it’s easy to sympathize with them, isn’t it? A few insider tips would sure be nice. What’s the harm? Is **this** the time? Just a little heads up, if you don’t mind.

Easy enough to understand.

I remember reading an issue of *Newsweek* years ago. On the cover, there was a picture of two regular-looking guys,

one dressed in powder blue, double-knit Sans-a-belt slacks, and a blue polyester shirt, and the other wearing all black.

At the time, these two guys were leading a revolution designed to give people a few hot tips for the restoration of the kingdom. In fact, so starved is the general population for a couple of hints that these two guys have sold over 80 bazillion books, purporting to offer an admittedly fictionalized account of what's going to happen when "the kingdom is restored to Israel."

Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins titled their series, *Left Behind*, but as the *Newsweek* article was quick to point out, the **reason** they wrote these books on their view of the end times was so that no one **would** be . . . left behind, that is. Remember that?

Not much has changed either. Adrienne LaFrance noted in *The Atlantic* last month that "No matter how many times the

world doesn't end, people will declare the end is near." She went on to write:

In many corners of the internet, people suggested the eclipse would cause humanity to shift back into a parallel-universe timeline that we apparently collectively abandoned in 2012 (another highly popular year for apocalyptic types). Others warned that the eclipse was confirmation that a second civil war in America would soon begin. Still others predicted the Second Coming of Christ. TikTok users warned, variously: "We must be alert," and "the end of the world is coming," and "I'm telling you right now, something is not right about this eclipse," and "insane prophetic events are coming!"

"Lord, is **this** the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

And how does Jesus respond?

"It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set by God's own authority."

But Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins—and presumably millions of other intrepid souls—say, "Oh yes, it **is** for us to know.

With the world as out-of-control as it is, we **have** to know. We can't bear **not** knowing. Lord, is **this** the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

But Jesus says to us the same thing he said to his followers 2000 years ago: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set down by God's 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."

And it is precisely at this point that Luke's account of the ascension gets interesting. Luke Timothy Johnson points out that, faced with followers hungry for a hint about the coming kingdom, Jesus shifted the focus from knowledge to mission.

"Jesus, tell us when. Give us a clue about how it will turn out."

And Jesus says, “When and how are none of your business. You won’t receive *information*, but you **will** receive power, power from the Holy Spirit. And you will be my witnesses.”

Oftentimes, people will greet me after worship on Sunday and they offer me a compliment: “You really made me think in that sermon today. And that’s a **good** thing. I guess we’re all just looking for a little bit better understanding.”

And, of course, I know what people mean when they tell me that they’ve been made to think. I’m a fan of thinking. I try not to make a habit of it, but I actually do it once or twice a week myself. But the goal of preaching isn’t only to produce a better understanding. The goal is to produce people committed to following Jesus.

Preaching isn’t just about trying to get us to think differently; preaching is about trying to get us to **live** differently. If what we say and do in here doesn’t translate

into our business dealings, our friendships, our families, and our support for those who've been kicked to the sidelines, then no matter how **interesting** it is, it isn't the gospel.

According to Jesus in our text, the gospel requires more than a few helpful hints to give us a leg up on the competition when the kingdom is restored. He actually wants the gospel to shape our relationships, our understanding of money, and our reactions to things like poverty, racism, homophobia, war, lying, and violence.

Christianity isn't a convenient add-on to an otherwise respectable middle-class life; it's the framework of belief and action in which real life takes place.

Knowing more about God isn't enough. Believing the "right stuff" isn't enough. In fact, **true** knowledge, true belief of God **always** entails a willingness to **do** something ... to be used in service to others. And unfortunately, we often fail to

understand what God is asking us to do and why, never truly able to believe until we start to actually do it.

If I were to say to you, "How would you like to become an Olympic swimmer?" you might first think that I was pulling your leg. Then you might ask me **how** I could make you into an Olympic swimmer. What if I said, "Well, I'll just **tell** you how to swim like an Olympic swimmer?"

Then, you might say, "And?"

"And what?"

"Well, just telling me how to be an Olympic swimmer won't make me one."

"Well," I'd say, "of course, that's not all. I've got charts."

"Charts? You've got charts? I mean, charts are fine, but ... "

"Yes, and diagrams. Charts and diagrams."

Exasperated, you say, "I can't learn to swim fast by looking at charts and diagrams."

"Well, I've also got **books** about Olympic swimmers."

"Charts and diagrams and books."

"I could get some videos."

"That won't work. You can't become an Olympic swimmer with charts and diagrams. You can't read a book and watch a video, and then all of a sudden become an expert on swimming. Charts and diagrams won't make you swim fast!"

"Why not? They're really good charts."

“Won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“If you want to learn to swim, at some point you have to get in the pool. You can’t learn to swim without practicing swimming. In fact, you can’t even truly say you know **how** to swim if you’ve never swum.”

The thought that it’s possible to learn to follow Jesus by picking up a book or going to a class is a popular one. But to be a disciple of Jesus, you actually have to get in the water and swim around a little. That is to say, in order to look like Jesus, you have to live like Jesus.

True knowledge of God is always proportional to our willingness to live faithfully as witnesses of God’s faithfulness to **us**.

True belief is never an end in itself. We concern ourselves with believing the right things not so we can have the satisfaction of being right but so that our **actions** will be rightly directed.

Actually **living** what we **know** and what we say we **believe** is the **real** point.

But guess what? And here's the good news. Yes, it takes a willingness to live as a witness in this world, to be a follower of Jesus, to be a faithful church. But we don't have to do it under our own steam.

The apostles are promised in our text that the power they need to live as witnesses comes as a **gift** from the Holy Spirit. There's no secret decoder ring, no insider's treasure map that will keep us from being "left behind." God seeks only our willingness to act on behalf of the coming reign as a vessel of the power of the Holy Spirit.

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Is it time? Will you help us understand?

And Jesus says, “It is not for you to know. The realm I have I mind isn’t about **knowing** anyway. You want knowledge, but I’ve got something better for you. You will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You want insight, but I’m offering you the strength to live the life **I’ve** lived. I’m not trying to persuade you; I’m trying to transform you. **You** will be my witnesses.

“You won’t always understand what’s going on. But don’t worry ... I promise ... you won’t be left behind.”

-Amen.