

Rise Together
Ascension Sunday (7th Sunday of Eastertide)
May 24, 2020
Trinity Bixby
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[Luke 24:44-53](#) (NLT)
[Acts 1:1-11](#) (NLT)

These days, we are all too familiar with the feeling of waiting. Going to the store? You may have to wait just to go into the building. Want to eat food from a restaurant? You will have to wait for one of the few tables to be open, or you will have to wait until you get home with your takeout. Want the end times to begin? The church has been waiting for more than 2000 years for that. You'd think we'd be better at it. But you don't see tutorials on "ten simple ways to wait more patiently!"¹ or self-help books entitled, "Waiting your Way to Wellness." We don't want to be better at waiting – we want to stop waiting! "Don't care how, I want it now!" we seem to cry along with Veruca Salt. And like the children from Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, the more we demand what we want, the more of a "bad egg" we become, spoiling ourselves in a stew of indignation, spiraling further and further away from the patience, gentleness, and self-control that are part of the fruit of the Spirit.²

Perhaps, then, it's no surprise that before the Spirit's gifts are poured out on the disciples, Jesus calls them to wait. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But wait here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven." Wait here, in the city of Jerusalem. Wait here. I'm going on ahead, but y'all just... wait.

And, when Luke continues to tell the story in the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples have trouble with this. Jesus has promised them immersion in the Holy Spirit sometime in the 40 days following the Easter resurrection. On the 40th day,

¹ Actually, it turns out, there are between 3 and 20 tips in various articles. But no video tutorials, as far as I could find.

² Galatians 5:22-23

when they get back together, they ask Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Note the difference there: promised to be immersed in the Holy Spirit, they ask about restoring Israel to self-rule. Jesus says... well, not “no,” exactly, but, “It’s not for you to know... but you will receive power... and will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all of Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The disciples are focused on the idea of Israel, the kingdom that was independent of overlords. They want freedom from oppression, not a bad desire – but they want it immediately. Jesus tries to refocus them, to show that the power of the Spirit is not meant to make these eleven disciples into super-soldiers, overthrowing the Roman oppressors by force. Instead, they are to be witnesses to God’s awesome power, not just in Jerusalem, not just in Judea and Samaria – roughly the northern and southern parts of Israel – but throughout the whole world.

Being witnesses to the power of God, throughout the whole world. They were being called, once again, to a different sort of action – an action of patience. Perhaps they wanted to rise up together in rebellion – freedom, now! – but Jesus encouraged them not to *rise up together* but instead, to *rise together*, like bread dough.

During this time of social distancing, so many people turned to making bread from scratch that there were flour shortages in the retail market! #quarantinebaking has been incredibly popular – and it involves a great deal of waiting. You can’t just mix all the dough ingredients, the flour, the sugar, the yeast, and the water, and then throw it in the oven! You have to wait for the yeast to proof – to show by bubbles in sugar-water that it’s awake. You have to wait for the dough to rise. You might have to punch it down and wait again before throwing it in the oven – and waiting for the baking to take place. Then, you have to wait for it to cool down again. Waiting suffuses the act of bread making – and yet, there’s a real sense that the waiting is not empty or meaningless. The waiting is soothing, like the baker is rising along with the dough.

When Jesus calls the disciples to wait and be witnesses to God’s power, it ought to give us a sense of rising together like the bread dough. Waiting with purpose. Small things taking place all over make a big difference when given time

to work. There are major events – the mixing of the ingredients, the punching down of the dough, and the baking – but in between, there are stretches that feel like nothing is happening that could feel maddening. Yet, Jesus reminds us that waiting for the right time is important. That being a witness, that offering testimony to God’s action in your life, is as meaningful as the yeast rising the bread. The loaf would not be complete without the rising, and the Kingdom of Heaven will not be complete without the testimony and witness of the disciples – the original 12 all the way through us today.

So far, we’ve been talking about Jesus’ last instructions to the disciples to wait – but the next thing that happens in the Gospel is that Jesus “ascends to heaven”. Now, it’s interesting to me that Luke tells the story of Jesus’ ascension twice. Like a baker, knowing that the bread isn’t done at the first rising, Luke changes the details for the second telling. The details change, because Luke knows that it’s more important to express WHY Jesus ascended than to excise extraneous details. In telling the story twice, Luke is showing us that Jesus has moved from the particular to the general – from being present physically at one time and place to being present spiritually at all times and places. The “cloud” that Jesus is “taken up” in in Acts is a symbol throughout the Bible of being with God – think of the Pillar of Cloud in the wilderness that led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, or the cloud that descends to cover the tabernacle. Isaiah describes a “Cloud of Dew,” Ezekiel a “Cloud of Fire,” and in the transfiguration story, we hear that Jesus and two others are present in a cloud on a mountain top.

Too often, Jesus ascending in this cloud is taken to mean that Jesus “left the building” and that there’s nothing left of the Kingdom of Heaven. That we’re meant to wait without ceasing, for Jesus’ return, and that nothing matters until then. Yet, the scene as described in Acts should show us the exact opposite. As the meme puts it, Ascension marks the time that Jesus was called to work from home! Yes, the disciples are called to wait – but they’re not called to wait out in the field around Bethany, with their mouths agape in wonder for eternity. Two messengers appear, and remind the disciples that Jesus didn’t want them to wait there. Trust that

Jesus will return, but do what needs doing in the meanwhile, they seem to say.

And so, the disciples do go back to Jerusalem. The first thing they do, in Acts, is open a committee meeting in prayer, to restore their number to 12. They do what needs doing to be an effective witness to God. They start thinking about the future, and making plans now to meet the needs that may come about. They stay in Jerusalem, as Jesus told them to – but they are active in their waiting for the Spirit to descend on them.

And let's be honest – we often need that kickstart, too. Stop gawping at the sky, and start waiting in a way that shows God's love to those around you. It's also a reminder on the other side, that we can do too much, trying to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on our timeline instead of on God's. As is often the case, we're called to be in the middle. Neither doing nothing, nor doing everything. In the present, we're called to be God's people, letting the Spirit work through us, neither focusing solely on what has happened, nor on what we imagine tomorrow will bring – but being present here and now, testifying to God's love and power in our lives.

In doing such small actions all over the world, we take part in being the body of Christ, the bread of life. We rise together, through living lives of love, of gradually growing in the Spirit's goodness. God's presence is with us, surrounding us like the clouds in which Jesus arose, supporting us in difficulty, and rejoicing in our small triumphs.

May you rise together in the Spirit of God, filled with the breath of life and healing. May you rise together in the Way of Christ, showing love and grace in your actions at all times. And may you rise together in the presence of God, lifted into fellowship with all of God's loving children. Amen.