

**Outta Here!
Acts 1: 1-11
Don Lincoln**

Nineteen years ago – preaching on this text – when I finished reading the Scripture lesson, I stepped down out of the pulpit and walked down the steps, out of the chancel, down the aisle and straight out of the sanctuary. No comment. No explanation. I went out the door and into the narthex. The ushers were in a panic. “What’s wrong?”

I stayed in the narthex for what felt like an eternity – probably 8 seconds – came back in, walked down the aisle, got in the pulpit, and said: “How’d that feel? When someone leaves, and you’re not sure what’s happening? What’s next? So it must have been with the disciples..... confusion, fear, discomfort.”

Looking back 19 years ago, I thought it was a great way to start a sermon. I’ve matured a little bit and I’m guessing some in the room were thinking, “What kind of stunt was that? This pastor who hasn’t even been here two years doing physical comedy in the middle of worship? What are in for? What else is he going to do?” But the point was made – “What’s going on?” was on everybody’s mind.

The uncertainty the disciples felt at the ascension must have been significant. Jesus commissions them that day – “.....you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And before they can ask exactly how, what, why and when they are going to do this the text indicates, “When Jesus has said this, as they were watching, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight.”

Have you ever been instructed on a job – or a piece of machinery or technology – or on a recipe – by someone else who shows you how to do something by giving you the example – maybe even showing you several times – and then all of a sudden, it’s YOUR turn. And your brain goes to mush. You can’t remember the order of things. You freeze, because you’re not sure where to start. Jesus has been doing all the preaching, teaching, healing – and suddenly, “Take the wheel guys. See you soon – AS THE HOLY SPIRIT!” Whoosh!

It made me think of all the new volunteers we have with our streaming technology here at Westminster. Folks willing to give up their morning and some other hours to learn the cameras, the sound board, the presentation software, or the streaming mixer to provide for our live, online worship. The streaming room looks like the cockpit of an airliner. It can be intimidating, and we are SO grateful to all of them, and it’s a huge commitment they have made to serve us all.

But imagine – the first time you’re responsible for the cameras, and the service is live, and you push the wrong button and instead of camera one you’re on camera four and you can’t find the person in the pulpit; or you’re on the sound board and you unmute someone’s mic and almost immediately a high pitched squeal of feedback screams through the sanctuary – and you panic – you forget everything they told you – and you just start pushing buttons. There’s a brief moment of chaos in worship that feels like eternity. We’ve all experienced something like that.

Imagine these disciples. “WHAT? Wait a minute. Come back. Explain how we are to be your witnesses. What are we supposed to do?”

The text says “They were gazing up toward heaven.” I’m thinking deer-in-headlights looks for sure. Then two men in white robes say, “Why are you standing there looking up?”

They have already forgotten Jesus’ instructions. “Wait,” He told them. “Don’t leave Jerusalem. Wait there for the promise of the Father. Trust me. You heard it from me before. **You will receive power not many days from now.** And you will be my witnesses.” I will send you what you need to do your job.

Jesus’ post-resurrection bodily presence was important for the disciples to see and experience to know He had risen, but those appearances limited Jesus’ ability to be present with them to one place.¹ His departure to reign as LORD means He can send His Spirit to be present with every disciple. In every town. In every home. In every land. Wherever His disciples go. As far and as wide creation exists.

I spoke about our new tech volunteers and the challenges of being in charge of all those buttons and dials and screens for the first time live. Let me be the first to say, if you’ve watched Westminster’s worship bloopers over the last year, you’re fully aware that we who are paid to do this every Sunday as our job – some of us who have been doing it for 40+ years – still forget to turn on mics, stand in the wrong place, and don’t have a clue what to do when the bread on the communion table doesn’t do what we thought it was going to do.

Jesus doesn’t promise it will be easy. The Book of Acts is full of the energy of the early Christians as they found God doing new things all over the place and learned to take the good news of Jesus from neighbor to neighbor; from village to village.

The book of Acts is also full of the puzzles and problems that churches faced then just like they face today – crises over leadership, money, ethnic division, theology and ethics – not to mention serious clashes with political and religious authorities. It was not “smooth sailing” for the early church; any more than it is now. But it was their calling to respond to; as it is our calling – to teach, preach, welcome, love, heal, care for – go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Augusta Victoria Hospital sits on the highest point of the mount of Olives, one of the sites claimed to be the place of Jesus' ascension. Administered by Lutherans since 1950, hospital staff at Augusta Victoria serve Palestinians living in the midst of occupation. Every day medical personnel and patients navigate Israeli checkpoints and closures to reach this hospital in East Jerusalem, which is renowned for bone marrow transplant and pediatric kidney dialysis, and is the only hospital offering radiation therapy in the Palestinian territories. The Lutheran Church World Federation manages that Hospital and the Lutheran Church of the Ascension shares the compound with the Hospital. The Church of Jesus Christ and a very troubled part of the world – witnessing to His care for every neighbor. Jesus.

The Book of Acts does not suggest that we should imagine our work witnessing to His love will be easy, will always be unambiguous, or clearly indicates it will never be complete. Jesus' ascension is a promise of vindication, so the Spirit can come and reside and stir in you and in me in the continued crucifixion and transformation of life as we know it. The Spirit is not merely for passive endurance to get us through; the Spirit is the very one who aids you and me to live differently even as the folks at Augusta Victoria are doing right now as witnesses to the risen, ascended, living Lord.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. Connections Commentary, Year B, Volume 2.