

## **Seek Guidance Together** Acts 1:6-14 (Easter 7A/Ascension Sunday)

Now What? What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do sermon series

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/seek-guidance-together/>

My sister and I attended college in Bolivar, Missouri, about two hours south of here. We enjoyed college, but we also loved being home here in Jefferson City. If our schedules allowed, we'd return home every three or four weekends to see our parents. I remember, on a few occasions, driving in on Hwy 54 and, upon seeing the sign that read, "CITY LIMIT JEFFERSON CITY," I'd start a drumroll on the dashboard of my sister's little red Geo Prism and end with a dramatic finish as we crossed the boundary line. I know, I was as cool and rebellious in college as you imagined me to be.

Home. We were home to a city and family we loved. Home to familiar places with cherished memories and where significant life events occurred. Home to a much-loved community in every sense of the word.

Perhaps you have a place or a people that brings similar feelings for you. A place you go to when you need to regroup or refresh. A people you go to when you need to remember who you are, where you came from, and who you want to be. A place where you learn things about yourself or make important life decisions. A people with whom you feel safe, known, and loved.

I remember my dad telling me about how he'd run away from home when he was 6 or 7 when he got upset with his mom. Where did that little boy run away to? His Grandma's house a block away, through the alley. His mom would see him walking up the alley from his house to his grandma's, and she would call her mom to watch for little Roger. When Roger arrived, his grandma would meet him on the back steps and welcome him in. I'm sure with milk and sugar cookies waiting. His Grandma Weaver's house was special to him, not just the place full of happy memories but, more importantly, the one he met there and how he felt loved and safe in her presence.

At our Maundy Thursday service this year, one of our members, Keith Enloe, wrote and performed a powerful monologue from the perspective of the man who owned and rented out the Upper Room, the term given to the location of the Last Supper of Jesus and His Disciples. We know little of the owner of this place, but we do know Jesus chose and made prior arrangements for the Passover meal to be shared in that upper room in his final hours with his closest friends.

According to scripture and many scholars, this room is not just the location of the Last Supper, where Jesus washed their feet, broke bread, and where Jesus gave his farewell discourse. It is also where the disciples gathered after the crucifixion during those dark and scary days. It is the room where the Risen Christ appeared twice to the disciples after the resurrection. It is the room in today's text where the disciples wait and pray after the Ascension of Christ and where the Holy Spirit settled upon believers gathered on Pentecost.

The Upper Room was like a home base. It was a physical place where they learned things about themselves and God's kingdom plan. It was a people they gathered with to remember who they were, where they came from, and who they were called to be. It was a place they went to when the city was

unsafe, and they were unsure of what to do next. It was where Jesus nourished, instructed, and appeared to them. And now, in our text today, it is a place where they wait expectantly for what will come next as Jesus commanded them to do.

In many protestant churches, the Ascension of Jesus is often ignored or overlooked. It is marked on the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Easter Sunday, which is a Thursday, this past Thursday. We don't gather for a special service or get another day off from work. Businesses haven't figured out how to capitalize off this holiday. I guess it is challenging to think of ways to market a holiday around someone who lived and died, then came back to live again and left again. What do you get someone for Happy Ascension Day? New sunglasses for gazing into the clouds? A t-shirt that says, "He came. He left. He came again. He left again. And all I got was this t-shirt."

But in many places and throughout the church's history, the Ascension of Jesus is an important day in the Christian calendar that brings everything full circle. To stop at the resurrection of Jesus is to stop short. God enters our world in Jesus. Jesus teaches us who God is and what God's kingdom is like, which upsets the powers in charge. Thus, crucifixion and death. Followed by burial, resurrection, and now, the ascension of the Risen Christ to heaven. It's a day that not only explains why there is no body of Jesus left on earth but testifies to who Jesus is. Jesus is now and forever seated at the right hand of God, one with God; and Jesus' love, forgiveness, and power are not bound by limits of time and place but are available to us all, always, forever, eternally.

According to Luke in the book of Acts, the risen Christ appeared to the disciples for a period of 40 days after the resurrection. Jesus used those days to encourage, instruct, and eat with his followers as he prepared them for what was next.

The disciples had an idea and a hope of what that might be. Like a broken record, they ask, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (6) They were asking if, finally, they would get what was due them, what they'd been waiting for hundreds of years, what they assumed God wanted for them. Their land, freedom, rightful power, and elevated place among earthly kingdoms, a nation victorious over all other nations, with military and political clout unmatched. Their question reveals their desire for an immediate resolution to their longings. We, too, often approach God in times of confusion, seeking quick answers or a clear roadmap for our lives, bringing our own ideas on how God could best meet our longings. Yet, Jesus' response provides us with a deeper perspective and teaches us about trusting God in times of uncertainty.

Jesus responded to the disciples' question with a gentle redirection, reminding them that it was not for them to know the times or seasons that God has set by God's authority. When we don't know what to do, we're invited to surrender our need for control and trust that God's timing and perspective are perfect. The disciples were asking for far less than God had planned for them. It is often the case with us when we don't know what is next. We place our hope and faith in the things of this world to fix our problems or meet our longings. We should be deeply grateful that God loves us and the world enough not to give us what we would settle for.

After Jesus ascended to heaven and the angels told them to stop gazing up at the sky, the men and women returned to Jerusalem as instructed. They returned to the upper room and there devote themselves to prayer as they waited. Was there work to be done? Yes. Could they have busied themselves with good things, kingdom things? Of course. But the command from Jesus this time on what

to do next was to wait. To stay in Jerusalem and wait until God's Spirit empowered them. According to Luke's timeline, it was ten days of waiting.

Could God have sent the Spirit sooner? Of course. Jesus could have gone up and the Spirit come down immediately, but that isn't what happened. God chose a waiting period. God designed and implemented a time of community, prayer, and discernment before they would be empowered to give witness to all they'd seen, learned, and experienced with Jesus.

Henri Nouwen wrote, "Waiting is a period of learning. The longer we wait, the more we hear about him for whom we are waiting."

Henri also wrote, "A waiting person is a patient person. The word patience means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us."

Perhaps this reveals the real challenge for us – patience and trust that something, or Someone, will reveal itself to us.

When we're asking, "Now What?" and unsure of what to do next, our default is to start grabbing at whatever soothes the anxiety and fear within us created by the unknown. We settle because we want the uncomfortable feeling to go away. We want certainty but what we're offered is clarity. *Certainty rests on how and what.* It requires us to know the outcome and how any choice will impact the outcome before taking any action. *Clarity is a state of mind.* It allows us to know the next step without knowing every aspect of the outcome. By its name, certainty is designed to avoid "uncertainty." Clarity is designed to be with "uncertainty."<sup>1</sup>

We cannot avoid uncertainty in life. What God teaches us is how to BE WITH uncertainty and that we don't have to be with it alone. We have the Risen and Ascended Christ, no longer bound by place and time. We have the Holy Spirit, our Advocate. And we have community.

We tend to pull away from community and God during waiting seasons. This is the exact opposite of what the scriptures teach us to do. The men and women returned to their home base in Jerusalem where they had shared the table, served one another, and encountered Christ. They reflected more deeply on all they had seen and experienced with Jesus. They gathered in unity, praying for God's guidance and provision. They were reminded that God's Spirit was not theirs to possess or control but a gift. Their waiting wasn't empty or pointless. It was expectant and purposeful. Their waiting was holy, and ours can be, too.

What if we reframed waiting from a burdensome gap to a bountiful gift? Waiting allows us to look at the big picture rather than be stuck in the weeds. Waiting can invite us to take stock of how we spend our days, which determines how we spend our years. Waiting opens our eyes to the gifts of community, learning to walk in step together rather than always doing things on our own. Waiting helps us not settle for what makes us calm but rather trust the One who gives us peace. Waiting teaches us to trust.

There is a story told about Pope John Paul II at his evening prayers after a challenging day. Someone overheard him pray, "Lord, this is your church. I'm going to bed." Isn't there comfort and grace in knowing we can say, "Lord, this is your project; your world; your family; your problem; your child. I'm going to bed." It doesn't mean we walk away from these things or don't pray in word and action for what

we believe might be God's dream for these situations. It means we pray in word and action while also trusting the outcome to God.

I've been praying this prayer a lot at night. Lord, this is your church. This is your community. I want a million clear answers about what is next for us, and I want it yesterday. But we will actively and expectantly wait on You. Lord, this is your church. I'm going to bed.

Life is filled with moments when we don't know what to do next. In those times of confusion, we are asked to turn to God for clarity, not certainty. We trust God's sovereignty, surrender our need for control, rely on the Spirit's presence and power, and devote ourselves to be a community united in prayer. By doing so, we can find peace, hope, and confidence, knowing that God is with us, and leading us step by step, even when the path ahead is unclear.

Jesus' ascension is not the end of a story. Jesus is not gone. Jesus didn't leave us. He didn't tap out when the Spirit came. Christ reigns now and forever and always over all the cosmos with God. The Risen Christ is still walking the earth as in the Gospels. He's just doing so now in and through Spirit-empowered believers like us. Jesus assured the men and women they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, enabling them to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. This same Spirit guides, empowers, and lead us today and assures us that we are never alone, even when we don't know what to do next.

When the disciples gathered in the Upper Room those ten days, they weren't running away or hiding from the world or what God wanted from them. They were obeying Jesus's command to wait on God, and doing what they knew to do while they waited. They didn't look for another leader to give them the kind of nation they longed for. They didn't get distracted by lesser things and quick fixes for their longings. They didn't go it alone. They prayed intensely while they waited as one community.

Perhaps you are going through a season of waiting or confusion over what to do next. If not, you will. When that happens, I pray this place is a place you come to just like Grandma Weaver's house. Just like the Upper Room. Not just a physical place, but more importantly, a community, a people who will help you discern the next right thing in love and for who you'll do the same.

- A people you go to when you need to remember who you are and who you were created to be.
- A place where you learn things about yourself or make important life decisions.
- A people with whom you feel safe, known, and loved.
- A place where we share the table, serve one another, and encounter Christ together.
- A people who don't settle for earthly kingdoms but remain loyal to God's kingdom.
- A place where we gather in unity and pray fervently for God's guidance and provision.
- A people who know God's Spirit is not ours to control but a gift to seek.
- A place that doesn't view waiting as empty or pointless, but rather as expectant and purposeful.
- A people, empowered by the Spirit, who refuse to be a holy huddle but instead go near and far to give witness to Christ's love and hope.

Through it all, may we remember we are not alone. We have the Risen and Ascended Christ, we have the Spirit, and we have each other. For the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.bhavanalearning.com/the-confusion-between-certainty-and-clarity/>