



“TO WHAT ENDS?”

Acts 1:1-11

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Several years ago when I was a student at Adrian College, the United Methodist campus ministry program called “Wesley Fellowship” decided to go on a retreat together. As a part of the retreat, we participated in a high ropes course challenge. After a half day of team building and trust exercises, we were harnessed in, attached to cables, and headed up a cargo net ladder about 30 feet into the trees.

Now I don’t know about you, but I’m not so good with heights. Our instructors reminded us to look out at the beauty around us rather than directly below us as we journeyed through the course. I’m not so sure that their words helped too much. When someone tells you, “Don’t look down,” what’s the first thing you find yourself doing? That’s right! You guessed it! We all looked down! As a result, some of the team couldn’t get past the cargo net to get started on the course.

Throughout the journey, however, the instructors would remind us to look out. At one point in time, we came to a platform that was attached to a tree. Another platform was nearby, only a foot or so away from us that was attached to another tree. The only way to get from one platform to the next was to jump.

Inevitably, I heard the words ringing in my ears, “Don’t look down,” but within a nanosecond, I found myself doing just that. On the ground, jumping a distance of one foot or two is easy for most of us. When you look down between a break from 30 feet up in the air, however, the jump feels like it’s miles away from you. I can’t even do a running long jump that kind of distance. I was terrified. Standing on the other platform, however, was the instructor telling us to focus on him and assuring us that we could do this. It only looked longer because we were so far up in the air. With a deep breath, a prayer, and the reminder to reset our focus to the tree that held the opposite platform, one by one, our team jumped the short span.

That day, we learned that sometimes the challenge is more about shifting our perspective than about the actual jump itself. A jump of a foot or two is nothing for most of us. On land, we have no problem making the jump because we know the ground will catch us when we come back down. Thirty feet in the air, even when we are attached to harnesses and overhead cables, seems like a long way to fall when you look down between that two feet of space between platforms.

The key, however, was to look out rather than down to get the best perspective for jumping. We had to look out to visualize our landing pad.

Luke begins Acts with the same story that ends the gospel that bears his name. Our lesson this morning is the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Following his resurrection, Luke reminds us that Jesus had appeared to the disciples over a period of forty days.¹ Just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus commands the disciples to remain in Jerusalem and await the gift of the Holy Spirit that will empower them for their ministry.²

Curious about what the future might hold for them and for the people of Israel, they ask Jesus if this is the time that he will restore the kingdom to Israel.³ Remember that this was their hope before his death. Now if God can raise Jesus from the dead, then surely Jesus would have the power to overthrow the wretched Romans and give the land back to the people, right? It's not odd that they should be focused on this. There are many writings of the scriptures that deal with the restoration of the kingdom and the land to the people. Surely it would be appropriate to think that this is what Jesus meant when he told them that they would receive "the Holy Spirit." The Spirit of God can set things right in their world. Now would be the perfect time for this type of powerful intervention from God.

Jesus, however, resets the perspective of the disciples. Like those of us caught up in a high ropes course, the disciples had their minds set on what they saw directly in front of them. Jesus turns their attention, however, out to the task at hand, to the horizon, to catch the bigger picture. He says, "It is not for you to know the times or the periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come up on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁴ In other words, the coming kingdom, the restoration of the blessed community, happens in God's time. Right now, you are to live it.

Robert Wall in *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary suggests that "Jesus does not respond to speculation surrounding what is 'not yet' but insists that his disciples engage in a mission 'right now.' He [Jesus] points out that disciples are not waiting for the Spirit within some apocalyptic time zone, where saving events come from heaven and erupt into human history in the 'twinkling of an eye.' The disciples are waiting for a different redemptive reality."⁵

Wall goes on to say that "God's reign will be reestablished among God's people not by some apocalypse from heaven but by a mission on earth."⁶ In other words, the restoration of the kingdom or the blessed community comes as a result of the work of the Spirit of God among the people of God, not simply by divine intervention that has no human involvement. As disciples, they must work to usher in the blessed community. The Spirit empowers disciples to be witnesses to a reign of love and grace that God is bringing about in the world. Yes, God is restoring the blessed community, but God uses the disciples to testify to the new reality that God will bring about among the people.

Jesus then clearly defines the scope of the mission for them. Listen again to the territory that Jesus entrusts to the disciples. When the Spirit comes upon them and empowers them, they will be witnesses of Jesus "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁷

Forty days after the resurrection, the disciples are encouraged to wait for the gift of the Spirit in Jerusalem. When the Spirit empowers them, their mission begins in the holy city, the city of peace, Jerusalem. It is in this city that God's presence is said to dwell in the Temple.

The mission extends from this place to Judea, the southern kingdom throughout which God's faithful people still dwell under the occupation of the Romans. This is the land of their families. It is the land that is comfortable for them, as well. This seems naturally to be the place of where God would reign among the people. They are also to be witnesses in Samaria, that wretched land to the north where no faithful Jew should ever walk because the land is tainted by Samaritans. They were part of the northern kingdom that gave themselves away to foreign rule well before Judea ever fell into the hands of Gentiles.

Finally, their mission extends to the ends of the earth. So the disciples are called to witness in the holy places of faith where God is known to dwell (Jerusalem), in their homelands among the people with who they are most comfortable (Judea), in the lands of those that contained their enemies (Samaria), and to the very ends of the earth. Jesus reminds the disciples that the restoration of the blessed community is not off in some distant future that they will never see, but something in which they are called to participate in today that all the world, including the places they dreaded the most, might be transformed. Perhaps John Wesley was on to something when he claimed that "The world is my parish."

Luke tells us that after Jesus had shared this mission with the disciples, he "was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."⁸ Even still, the disciples stood around looking into the heavens. Perhaps they were amazed at what they had just experienced. Perhaps they were waiting for Jesus to come right back. Perhaps they were waiting for the Spirit of God to come bursting forth anyway. Who knows?

All we know is that they were gazing up into the heavens when "Suddenly two men in white robes stood by them."⁹ (This sounds familiar, doesn't it? A little like the Easter story?) The two men said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven."¹⁰

In a very simple reminder, right after Jesus gave the disciples perspective about their part in the mission that was "right now" rather than some future "not yet" event, these two men dressed in white have to remind them that the task is now at hand before them. The time to bring their witness to the ends of the earth is now. They are to be a part of testifying to the blessed community here and now, not sometime later. The blessed community is not simply something that will arrive later like a pie in the sky when they die, but Jesus will come as they live out their witness to the ends of the earth.

I wonder if it is sometimes easier for us as human beings to simply wait and hope for some day that God would set the world right. We see images that flash before us on television screens and change at such a rapid pace. We live in productive societies where life changes around us at such a fast pace. As the world swirls around us, there are things that we'd like to change in the "twinkling of an eye." Yet, Jesus moves the disciples' perspective into the realm of visionary

leadership as he invites them to consider being witnesses to the reign of God, or to the blessed community, that they seek.

Jürgen Moltmann, in *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, said, "Believing in the resurrection does not just mean assenting to a dogma and noting a historical fact. It means participating in this creative act of God's... Resurrection is not a consoling opium, soothing us with the promise of a better world in the hereafter. It is the energy for a rebirth of this life. The hope doesn't point to another world. It is focused on the redemption of this one."¹¹

As disciples, when we encounter difficulties in our lives and even in the church, it can be tempting to hope for the better day. Yet, Jesus reminds the disciples and us that we are called to work for it here and now. Here and now, in this time and place, we are witnesses of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. Here and now, in this time and place, we bear witness to the blessed community to which God calls all of creation until that community is fully realized among us. God is at work redeeming and restoring the world, not in some distant future, but here and now through the faithful witness of disciples today.

This is why we put love into action through long term mission connections at Birmingham First. We not only seek a temporary alleviation of suffering, but the transformation of communities nearby and far away.

We maintain our core value to "encourage lifelong spiritual growth" because we know that it takes a lifetime to grow as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. We invest in our children now because we know that they are transforming the world today and will be doing so tomorrow as well as they continue to grow as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "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." To what ends? To the ends of the earth! For what ends? That the world may be transformed; that the kingdom or the blessed community for which we long and pray, may be realized in our midst, here and now. May the world catch a glimpse of that community in us! Perhaps all that is needed is a change in perspective.¹¹

¹ Acts 1:3.

² Acts 1:4-5.

³ Acts 1:6.

⁴ Acts 1:7-8, NRSV.

⁵ Wall, Robert W. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. X. Ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 2002), 42.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Acts 1:8.

⁸ Acts 1:9, NRSV.

⁹ Acts 1:10, NRSV.

¹⁰ Acts 1:11, NRSV.

¹¹ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/52217.J_rgen_Moltmann