

Easter 7A  
Peace, Seattle  
May 28, 2017  
Acts 1:6-14, 1 Peter, John 17

## **BECOMING WITNESSES**

**Memorial weekend marks a transitional time of the year.** It tells us the end of school is near and summer is just around the corner.

- Colman Pool is open for business;
- Folklife is in high gear;
- Gardens are being planted and camping gear is coming out of the closet.
- Students (and teachers) are counting down the days before summer break,
- and seniors are looking toward graduation and the life that awaits them beyond.

**On the Christian calendar**, this time of the year is also a time of transition; and a time of waiting.

Today's lesson from Acts brings us alongside the first disciples as they gather around their crucified and risen Lord for a final time.

Still reeling from the events of Easter week, their minds racing to find language for what they've been experiencing, they gather with hope, but also some anxiety. They are a community in transition.

As long as Jesus was with them, they knew things would work out. But now, as they gape at the sky, they ask: **What on earth are we to do now?**

Full of unanswered questions, they gather to pray, to support one another, and to cling to Jesus' final instructions: WAIT FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT. WAIT.

**Sandwiched between what has been and what is yet to be, we too wait and watch like the disciple community. And what a context it is in which we wait.**

- The targeting of music fans in Manchester and Coptic Christians in Egypt by ISIS extremists, have brought shock and vulnerability front and center again.
- In the other Washington, executive orders are being questioned by the courts, even while FBI and congressional investigations gain steam.
- Meanwhile, here at home the pains that come with being the fastest growing major city in the country are adding new challenges to the civic plate.

**Poised between past and future, we stand with the disciples of Acts at the edge of the unknown, asking: What on earth are we to do now?**

**Peter, in the second lesson, puts this transitional experience into a larger context.**

Writing to communities under the pressure of persecution by the Empire, Peter reminds them that participation in the glory of God can't be separated from participation in the suffering of God.

To live between Christ' first coming and his return is to live with all the ambiguities and brokenness of the world, says Peter, and that means, for we who are faithful, that pain is never very far away.

BELOVED, he says, DO NOT BE SURPRISED THAT A TRIAL BY FIRE IS OCCURRING AMONG YOU, AS IF SOMETHING STRANGE WERE HAPPENING TO YOU. BUT REJOICE INSOFAR AS YOU ARE SHARING CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS, SO THAT YOU MAY ALSO BE GLAD AND SHOUT

FOR JOY WHEN HIS GLORY IS REVEALED... IF YOU ARE INSULTED FOR BEARING THE NAME OF CHRIST, BLESSED ARE YOU! FOR THE SPIRIT OF GLORY AND OF GOD RESTS UPON YOU.

The promise of glory, he seems to say, can only be understood in light of the cross. Suffering doesn't mean abandonment by God. Suffering for doing the right thing simply comes with the territory of being faithful.

**When crisis or challenge or change is on the horizon, some people respond as pessimists.** Their attitude limits their vision, all they can see is the obstacles, and the potential for failure.

**Other people act like ostriches, and stick their heads in the sand**, they figure the safest thing to do is to ignore reality and hope it will go away.

**Still others just stand there bewildered, shaking their heads**, wondering how they ever got in this fix; waiting for someone to tell them what to do, which direction to go.

**In the days after Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples went through all of these stages.** First they locked themselves in behind closed doors in fear for their lives. And Jesus came among them bringing peace and reassurance.

**A week later he came to them again**, and found them still behind locked doors. Were they afraid of death? Or were they afraid of life?

**In today's first lesson, we witness the disciples' final encounter with the risen Jesus.**

**Their minds are full of questions—Is this the time? Have we arrived? Is this the moment we've been waiting for?** But Jesus puts their questions aside and instead he issues them marching orders.

**YOU WILL RECEIVE POWER FROM ON HIGH, he tells them, AND YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES IN JERUSALEM, IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA, AND TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.** This was no time for pessimism; no time to play ostrich; no time to stare at the sky.

It was time to prepare for the Spirit—for an encounter that would give them a whole new repertoire for response, by seeding them with power and purpose, and propelling them outward to be Christ's witnesses in their families, in their neighborhoods, in their communities—even to the ends of the earth.

**The mission Jesus gave his disciples is the mission you and I share in, the same mission we have a stake in, to be Christ's witnesses. To share his story within the daily rhythms of our daily lives.**

**This mission isn't a motto, it is our life, the reason for which this community exists. And the trajectory of our mission is not upward toward the heavens, but outward into the world. The story in this Ascension text is not finally about when or how Jesus will come back.** It's about where we as Christ's community in the world will put our energy.

**By leaving the community he's formed and returning to the Father, the risen Christ makes himself available to all people, places, and times, through the Spirit which will be unleashed among them.**

**There's a story about a boat that was caught in a storm at sea, and began to break up.**

As the ship went down, five people managed to get on one of the inflatables boats, and they found themselves the next day in the middle of the ocean with only a few days' supplies, and the nearest land hundreds of miles away.

Confronted with the situation, one passenger said,  
IT'S HOPELESS. WE'LL NEVER MAKE IT. WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE.

A second passenger said,  
IT'S TRUE, WE'RE A HUNDRED MILES FROM THE NEAREST LAND. BUT MAYBE WE'LL BE RESCUED. WE SHOULD STAY HERE, TRY TO CONSERVE OUR ENERGY, AND KEEP ALIVE AS LONG AS WE CAN.

The boat fell silent as they all contemplated the difficulty of the circumstances they were in.

**Finally, a third person, a member of the crew, spoke up.**

IF WE DO NOTHING AND STAY PUT, he said, WE MAY BE FOUND, OR, WE MAY NOT BE.

I'VE TRAVELED THIS ROUTE BEFORE, he continued. THE PLACE WE'RE AT HAS NO CURRENT. BUT 50 MILES EAST OF HERE, THERE IS A CURRENT THAT WILL CARRY US STRAIGHT TO THE ISLANDS. IF WE ALL PICK UP A PADDLE AND START ROWING, WE'LL BE ON OUR WAY.

The vision of one, gave reason for all to hope. They picked up their paddles, found the current, and made landfall three days later, weary, but alive.

Whenever a crisis or significant change comes along, some people are pessimists. Some are like ostriches. Others wait for someone to tell them what to do.

But some have the gift of sorting out the situation, identifying the resources, connecting to their source of inspiration, and then striking out toward the future, putting their best foot—or best oar—forward.

**Yet even they can't get where they're going alone. They need a community just as much as the community needs them. That's why Christ has brought us together.**

**When we find ourselves asking, What on earth do we do now? Christ's call is clear: You are to be my witnesses. Fed at his Table, empowered by his Spirit, we who are still in the world, become Christ for one another. And the grace is, God uses even our broken lives to make his love known. Amen**