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Title: While You Wait

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Luke 24:44-53](#)

Text: [Acts 1:6-11](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



It is good to be back in worship from yet another trip, carrying Ann's bag to a Kiwanis European convention, this time in Iceland. It is a fascinating place to visit and we had great weather. Fifty-two degrees and sun, 21 hours a day. We saw some amazing things waterfalls and glaciers, waterfalls and black sand beaches, waterfalls, and a geyser and

waterfalls and puffins, including one who sat on my head. You get the point; there are a lot of waterfalls. My favorite spot wasn't a waterfall but a fascinating place, Þingvellir National Park, a UNESCO world heritage site because it is something of a birthplace of democracy. The Vikings and Norse settlers of Iceland gathered at Althing law rock early in the 10th century. But Þingvellir has a gorge which is the very place where the North American tectonic plate and the European plate bump up against each other. Walk this gorge and you are in a way walking in-between two continents.

In-between. That's where we are. We are in-between Jesus' ascent into heaven and his return. He left last Thursday. Maybe you missed that but Thursday was exactly forty days from Easter. It was Ascension day, the day the disciples watched as Jesus "...was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." (Acts 1:9b) We celebrate this weekend because most of you were busy on Thursday. How many of you got the day off for Ascension Day? In some parts of the world, Ascension Day is a holiday. France and Germany, almost all of the Nordic nations like Iceland, set aside the Ascension as a national holiday. Government offices, schools, banks, and many businesses are closed.

Why don't we have it as a national holiday? There are probably lots of reasons for that, but Eugene Peterson, the man who translated the Bible into "The Message", thinks it is because the world can't steal it. He wrote: "The culture around us has quite ruined Christmas and Easter. The world has stolen Christmas for its consumeristic purposes and has seized Easter for the same idolatry." We all know that. We talk all the time about the commercialization of those holidays. But Peterson goes on to say this about

the Ascension. "But the world hasn't got the foggiest notion of what to do with someone flying out."¹ What do you do with Jesus ascending into heaven, Jesus flying up and out? That's my challenge in talking to you today and it's the challenge that the early disciples had.

Luke is the only writer of the New Testament to deal with the ascension. Mark doesn't say anything about it. He ends abruptly with the women at the empty tomb and these downer words "...they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." (Mark 16: 20) There is absolutely nothing about 40 days of appearances or ascension into heaven.

The Gospel of Matthew has the Great Commission. We know this by heart. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28: 19-20) Jesus makes this challenge on a mountain top. We assume that he then ascended into heaven. But Matthew doesn't say he was carried up.

John ends Jesus ministry on the beach, challenging the disciples and Peter, in particular, to feed his sheep. I like stories that end on the beach because I like the beach. It's a lot easier to talk about being on the beach and feeding sheep than Jesus flying up into heaven.

Luke is the only one that shares this story and I'll admit, it is hard to get your head around Jesus flying up into heaven. But no harder I think, than what they had experienced over the forty days. Can you imagine it? Every day there is a reminder that Jesus was crucified but was now alive. Every time Jesus gestures, he presents to them his hand and they see the nail prints. What a mind-boggling experience it was for them. Every day, each day and as far as we know, Jesus didn't say to them, "We are going to be together for just forty days. He just kept opening their minds to scripture.

Then on the fortieth day, Jesus takes the disciples out to Bethany, a familiar place to the disciples. Bethany was the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha whom Jesus stayed with during Holy Week. Six weeks earlier, when Jesus finished his last supper, he withdraws to Gethsemane, which is at the foot of the Mount of Olives. This time they don't stop at the foot. They climb to the top of the Mount of Olives. The disciples' sense that something was about to happen so they ask Jesus "Is this when the kingdom starts?" Jesus said to them "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." (Acts 1:6-7)

There is another one of those passages where we are told, we won't know when the world will end. But men and women for centuries have wanted to know. When does the kingdom come? When will the world end? The ancient Mayan's thought they knew. Their calendars had a date; it was wrong. When Mount Vesuvius covered Pompei in 79 A.D, surely it was the end. No. In 1910, people thought Hailey's comet was a sign of the end of the world. Jehovah's Witnesses said the end-time was 1914. Pat Robertson said on television that the end was coming in 1982. Anybody remember Harold Camping's prediction in 2011? It didn't happen in May so he moved it to October. Didn't happen then either. He died heartbroken two years later. ²

None of these were as heartbreaking as what religious historians call "the great disappointment." The great disappointment took place in 1844 when a Baptist minister by the name of William Miller, convinced thousands of people that October 21, 1844, was the day of Jesus return. The people who believed in him were called Millerites. His prediction was based on a verse of scripture from the Book of Daniel, "For two thousand three hundred evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state." (Daniel 8:14) When Jesus didn't appear, there was great disappointment. Thousands and thousands of people were depressed; some committed suicide. A small group of people thought that Miller was right about the date but wrong about the location. They thought Jesus had restored the sanctuary but it was in heaven. But he didn't return because the church wasn't worshipping on the Sabbath. So they started to worship on the Sabbath, on Saturday and we know them now as Seventh Day Adventists. ³

Miller and the author Tim LeHaye who wrote the Left Behind series present a theological position called pre-millennialism. Adherents of this theological view expect a rapture to take place, where the church will fly up to meet Jesus in the air, right before a period of the great tribulation. Afterward, Jesus will return again with the saints for his final manifestation and reign for a thousand years. Simply put, Jesus makes two trips.

Members of the Stone-Campbell movement and the Christian Church have offered a different position called "post-millennialism," a one trip theory. It says the power of the Gospel and church will become greater rather than smaller. As the church fulfills the Great Commission there will be a great blessing in the world. After 1,000 years of this, Jesus will return. In fact, founding father Alexander Campbell was so convinced of this that he named a journal, the Millennial Harbinger.

Now that may be more about the end times than you ever wanted to know but the point is this. If someone tells you he or she has a date, turn around and run. They don't know. Jesus says more than once that only God knows when the kingdom comes.

We are waiting in this in-between time, between Jesus ascension into heaven and his return. It is not for us "...to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." (Acts 1:7) So what do we do while we wait? We get busy. That's what Jesus says to his disciples. "But 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." (Acts 1:8) It's Luke's version of the Great Commission.

Make disciples. Be my witnesses, starting with Jerusalem, the spreading to Judea, on to Samaria, bigger and bigger circles until you have blessed the entire world. Be my witnesses until I return. Make the world my place. Advance my kingdom.

It's a post-millennialist view that we have a responsibility, a partnership with Jesus, that however long Jesus is "gone", while we wait, we witness. And this passage suggests that there is some urgency to our work. Disciples can't just stand around and enjoy the view. There on the top of the Mount of Olives, they are stunned, watching Jesus flying out. As they were "...gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?'" (Acts 1:8) Witnesses don't just stand around waiting for heaven to come. "Never at any point do the gospels or Paul say Jesus has been raised, therefore we are all going to heaven. They all say, Jesus is raised, therefore the new creation has begun, and we have a job to do."⁴

The Ascension teaches us this. Jesus expects us to get busy on his behalf. It's on us. Jesus says, "Be my witnesses."

Jesus doesn't say, "Those of you who really get it, be my witnesses." Matthew tells us that when on that mountaintop, "some doubted." But Jesus still said to all of them "Make disciples of all nations."

Jesus doesn't say, "Those of you who are really caring and compassionate, be my witnesses." He said, "If you love me, feed my sheep."

Jesus doesn't say, "Those of you who are articulate or who've been to seminary or who are so extroverted that you'll talk to any stranger, be my witnesses." Jesus looks at all of the disciples and those tax collectors and fisherman who often times didn't get it, imperfect people like you and you and me and says, "You are God's plan for sharing the gospel while I'm gone while you wait for my return. So get busy."

Before you raise your hand and offer the excuse that you don't know enough or you're too busy or that you are not strong enough in your faith, Jesus is clear that this is a partnership and he will send help. Jesus says: "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:8). Again, that "you" isn't just the disciples on the mountain. It's you who are sitting here in worship at Geist Christian Church. Next week, we celebrate this power when the Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost. What the Holy Spirit did for the disciples in forming the church, it can do in you and me. But we have to be willing to witness, to

be "...witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8b) That's what Jesus expects of us "while we wait".

In that expectation, Jesus creates a framework for witnessing, drawing circles around their lives. As he ascended they were in Jerusalem, on the outskirts of the Holy City at the Mount of Olives. Jerusalem was their first circle. Their family and friends were in Judea, the second circle. Further out was Samaria and it represented people unlike them who they weren't sure about. The circles continue further and further out to the very ends of the earth. It's the way the church grew and it is the way the cause of Christ grows today.

Think about it the way Jesus teaches it. Draw your circles of influence. Who is closest to you? Who is in that inner circle who you trust the most, who you can say anything to? Have you witnessed to them? Have you shared why worship is important? Have you told them about the power of prayer and the ways being a follower of Jesus makes a difference in your life?

How about that next circle out, the Judea for you? Make it your community of friends and co-workers, the people you touch on a regular basis. Have you offered a word of encouragement to a neighbor? Have you offered to pray for your co-worker? Have you told someone about your joy in serving others in need?

There are circles beyond your Jerusalem and Judea, those closest to you and your extended community. And you reach them by reaching others. Like a pebble in a pond, the witness for Jesus Christ grows and while we wait for his return, he expects us to get busy. So while I can't tell you the date and time of his coming, I can tell you this. You are his witnesses.

So, on this Ascension weekend, let me make this challenge. Whether you are a dispensational pre-millennialist, a post-millennialist or an "I don't know millennialist" Jesus never wanted us to be so heavenly minded that we were no earthly good. He expects that while we wait, we'll witness. Who will you witness to? Who will you invite, to the ministry of Christ, to the work of the church, to this place? Come up with a name, one in one of your circles and know that "you will receive power to be his witness."

¹ Marva J. Dawn and Eugene H. Peterson, *The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call* (Eerdmans, 2000), p. 140

² <https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-06-11/end-world-top-10-doomsday-predictions-didnt-come-true-photos>

³ American Adventism, The Great Disappointment, retrieved June 2, 2011,
<http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1999/issue61/61h031.html>

⁴ N.T. Wright, Time Magazine, as quoted by Homiletics, June 5, 2011.