

## “The Joy of Waiting”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver  
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon  
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### Acts 1:6-14

<sup>6</sup>So when [the apostles] had come together, they asked [Jesus], “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” <sup>7</sup>He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup>While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup>They 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 as you saw him go into heaven.” <sup>12</sup>Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. <sup>13</sup>When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. <sup>14</sup>All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

The *Joy of Cooking* has been a staple for home chefs since it was first published in 1931; this Bible of the Kitchen has gone through numerous editions and revisions since it first appeared. It has also been something of an organizing family principle for the descendants of Irma Rombauer, the author of the first edition. Her daughter, and then her grandson, and now her great-grandson and his wife have built a gustatory empire over the decades with outposts in homes across America. Over almost 90 years, *The Joy of Cooking* has become an institution.

It is also a great title. It’s short, it’s snappy, it’s memorable. It has inspired similar names for other works, like the *The Joy of Movement*, *The Joy of Later Motherhood*, *The Joy of Watercolor*, and, yes, *The Joy of Sex*. All have riffed on the theme first broached in the cookbook: that doing something can be a way to find happiness.

As I was reading the Scripture lesson for today, I was struck by the importance of waiting. And so, I wondered if there was a book entitled, *The Joy of Waiting*. Nope, at least not according to Amazon, which claims to be the world’s largest bookstore.

I shouldn’t be surprised by this, should I? We live in a hyper-kinetic world, where communication is instant, so much is available on demand, and people are complaining

in the midst of a global pandemic that they may have to wait an extra day or two for their home deliveries to arrive. We want things now. We most definitely do *not* want to wait.

But as Christians, we are called to wait.

Think of today's lesson from Acts: The Risen Jesus corrects his disciples. He makes them a promise and offers them a commission. His Ascension to heaven takes place. Two messengers appear out of nowhere to tell the disciples to stop staring and get going. The disciples gather in the Upper Room and, with others including Mary, they pray. And all in just nine verses!

It's rather remarkable that even after Jesus' death and resurrection, even after they have spent forty days studying with their risen Lord, the disciples still do not understand what Jesus was about. They still think that the old Davidic monarchy will be restored—and perhaps that they will receive prime positions under the new dispensation, since they had been his closest followers. But as we know, Jesus did not come to restore a lost golden age, he did not intend to make real misguided nostalgia. Instead, he came to fulfill the promise of God: to bring new life to all his people.

One of the great faults in the disciples' presumptions was that God was going to redeem Israel and be done with his work. But given that they were Jews, and Jesus was a Jew who primarily taught and healed Jews, this may not have been unreasonable. Still, the idea of God being concerned with all Creation had precedent in the history of Israel. Recall the prophecies of Isaiah, which saw God as ruling all Creation. True, Israel was to be at the center of this new age, but it was to be all about God, not the people. The parochialism that affected the disciples' thinking is something that people of all nationalities, all religions, all types need to be on guard for. We can all want "our" side to come out on top, to be number one, especially when we feel that we've been losing or treated unfairly.

But what we want is not what Jesus wanted. Nor is it what he taught. His ministry was meant to prepare people for the new age, the time when heaven and earth would be made one. Now, just as we might focus our eschatological hope on the people we know and with whom we live, we might envision heaven and earth only as places we know or can imagine. We may separate these places, seeing heaven as "up there," a paradise one enters through some pearly gates. Jesus did not. Jesus understood heaven and earth to be part of one Creation, and he knew that this world and the Kingdom of Heaven had much in common; for starters, both had been created by God. Rather than envision two completely separate spheres, I believe that we might see two overlapping realms which, when the work of God has been completed, will finally be one. If this sounds bizarre, I would remind you that modern physics has taught us in recent decades just how strange the universe is, how much more we still have to learn about the cosmos. And if that does

not convince you that heaven is not some place “up there,” I would ask you this: up from where: Jerusalem? Lebanon, New Hampshire? Sydney, Australia?

Yes, our imaginations, while fertile, are limited. But Jesus still had confidence in the disciples, just as he does in us. He knows we will take wrong turns along our journeys. Even though he told his followers there were some things they would not know, like the times that God the Father had set by his authority, people still believe they can use the Bible to predict future events, including the day of the Second Coming. Here, though, Jesus says they should focus on something else, on something that matters: the imminent arrival of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter is the Third Person of the Trinity. I have said on other occasions that we mainline Protestants can have difficulty understanding the Spirit that we do not encounter with the Father or the Son. But the Spirit is just as real, just as much a part of the Triune God. And here, at the beginning of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus leaves the disciples, and his work will be taken up by the Sustainer he promised.

This was huge news, something we can imagine people would want to sit with and think about. The disciples, though, were distracted by the spectacle of Jesus ascending to sit at the right hand of the Father. Now, I am not saying this was not an awesome event. I can only imagine it was, well, mind-blowing. But those messengers appeared to tell the disciples to stop standing around gawping because the Jesus who had left would return, and by implication, they should move on into the future.

Whether the promised return here of Jesus is envisioned in tradition with his Second Coming in glory, or whether he would be with the disciples in the form of the Spirit, is not clear. What is inarguable is this: the story was most definitely not over. There was more to come, and the disciples would play a role in the future that God envisioned.

But not just yet.

This is when the waiting would happen.

This was the moment for the disciples to stop and catch their collective breath.

We remember all of this liturgically on this Seventh Sunday of Easter, falling between the Feast of the Ascension, which this year was on Thursday the 21st, and Pentecost, which we will observe next week on the 31st.

William H. Willimon, in his commentary on Acts, notes that Karl Barth, the great mid-twentieth century German theologian, wrote of “this time between ascension and Pentecost as a ‘significant pause’ between the mighty acts of God, a pause in which the church’s task is to wait and pray, *Veni, Creator Spiritus* (Come, Creator Spirit).” Willimon

adds, “This text therefore appears in the Common Lectionary on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, between Easter and Pentecost, in a time of expectant waiting for the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

*Expectant waiting.* I like that phrase. It’s rich with meaning, it’s evocative, and it suggests that waiting might actually be exciting.

Do you remember waiting for things you wanted when you were a child? Perhaps it was the start of summer vacation or a family trip. Maybe it was going to a ball game at Fenway or getting an ice cream on a warm summer’s evening. The waiting might have been hard, but it was matched by expectation and hope. The emotions we experienced were powerful, and as in the case of Pentecost, filled with excitement.

The Holy Spirit is coming. *To us!*

God is going to continue the work he did in Jesus *with us!*

I understand why one might want to get on with things, to just rev up the machinery and start building the church. But think about what the disciples did: they gathered together in the Upper Room, and there they prayed.

They did not engage in make-work.

They did not sit around gabbing or shooting the breeze.

They did not just twiddle their thumbs.

They prayed.

In a moment of anticipation, in a time of transition, when things were about to change, the disciples stopped and prayed.

And not just amongst themselves: others were with them, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, and some other women.

It’s worth noting here that right at the beginning of the church’s story, both women and men were present, foreshadowing Paul’s words in Galatians (3:28) that in Jesus Christ there was “no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female,” for in him “all of you are one.” All of the distinctions we fret over were meaningless to the followers of Jesus, just as they were and are to Christ himself, at this seminal moment. When the disciples and others came together, they did not focus on what made them different, what set them apart—on the parochialism we noted earlier—but on praying with one another. This is what would enable them to bring to Jerusalem and Samaria and places far and near the startling news of what God had done in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1988), 20.

It was in prayer that they were united, one people before God. We do not know what prayers they said, what liturgy they followed, whether they used set words that had been offered in the synagogue, or if they prayed extemporaneously. What we do know is that just before the church was born, the people prayed.

It was prayer that opened the disciples and the others to the Holy Spirit.

It was prayer that equipped the disciples and others to go forth and share the Good News in an often hostile but desperately needy world.

We find ourselves in a place radically different from yet strikingly similar to that of the disciples of long ago. We, too, are in need of the comfort and sustenance of the Holy Spirit. We, too, must discern the way forward for the church in an uncertain time. We, too, must work together to determine the best way for us to do ministry, even though that may mean we will have to do things differently.

As we contemplate reopening our church and resuming worship and the provision of services to our community, we know we will have to wait, to be patient. We agreed in Council that we would wait until at least the end of June before we reopen our doors—and we know that when we do, at whatever future date, we will have to deal with the problems of singing in public, of corporate prayer, of cleaning pews and other surfaces, of social distancing, of doing our part to keep one another safe.

It all seems so hard.

But, without meaning to sound glib, nobody is being fed to the lions, are they?

Yes, the new normal we may face will have its challenges, and they will be real. But we are the church, the people of God, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we will gather, whether in a sanctuary or in cyberspace or both. We may need to revise our way of worship, to make changes, but we will still be the church.

Think back for a moment to *The Joy of Cooking*. Talk about change! Through four generations, tastes have changed, interest in healthy eating has grown, the number and types of foods that are available to cooks have exploded. *The Joy of Cooking* has changed. Yet it is still *The Joy of Cooking*.

The church has been around for 2,000 years, our stream of Protestantism for 400, our congregation for more than 250, and each has experienced change and challenges. But all have endured, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray that we may, too. Let us pray that as we anticipate the future, we might come to know the joy of waiting, so that we may be ready for what God has in store for us.