

Based on Acts 1:6-14
Seventh Sunday of Easter

When the apostles had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and 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? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 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. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Acts 1:6-14

This story from Acts is celebrated each year as the Feast of the Ascension. After his resurrection, Jesus spent some time (40 days) appearing to his followers and continuing to reassure them after the trauma of his death. But after that too brief of time, Jesus departs from the disciples to be at the side of God the Father.

I've often thought that it might have been better if Jesus had stuck around a while and helped out a little more, maybe given some more concrete advice or even written a book of his own so that we could get it "straight from the horses mouth," if you will. But instead of doing that, Jesus instead went to be with his father and left God's mission to redeem the world in the hands of the disciples, whom, to be honest, the Bible doesn't show to have always been the most reliable or brightest people available for the task.

But here we see that the disciples won't be left wholly on their own, but that the very spirit of God will come to guide and animate them. And given that there are billions and billions of Christians in every corner of the world suggests that maybe Jesus had it right all along. The bumbling disciples turned out to be pretty effective apostles for the Good News after all.

Throughout the scriptural story, there is the idea that human choice matters. God creates a world where we are compelled to choose, whether to follow God and the path that leads to abundant life or to turn away and make our own path towards death, or worse, to follow the path laid down for us that leads not only to death but to the evil which results in the suffering and death of others.

We are not robots or puppets that God dangles at the end of a string. We have choices, we have agency, we can choose a world where everyone thrives or one where we descend into a hellish chaos of individualistic striving headless of cost. When Jesus said that the kingdom of God has come near, he meant that the abundant life within God's will was ours for the choosing. Christ's promise of abundant life isn't something in the far future or something we can grasp only in death; we can choose to live in the kingdom of God right here, right now.

Jesus showed us how to do it by living it. And he gathered the disciples knowing that they too could, in time, model their lives on his and live as Christ lived; teaching and modelling to others how it could be done. And most importantly, the Holy Spirit still is with us, guiding us and showing us how to live the kingdom life day to day if we but open our hearts and our eyes to see the spirit of God alive within ourselves and hearing its invitation to us – do not be afraid, for I am with you, even to the end of the ages.