



Roanoke, Virginia
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“Lived Hope”

Invest in Hope Sermon Series Part II

Acts 1:1-11

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The last time I preached, I based my sermon on a resurrection story and it wasn't Easter. Today, I am basing my sermon on an Ascension passage and it isn't Ascension Sunday. I feel like a pulpit rebel.

I'm not really trying to be out of kilter with the church season. We preaching pastors are preaching a sermon series with the theme, "Invest in Hope." Today, I want to talk about the hope that comes of living... especially the lived experience of a healthy church. In the passage I am about to read, don't focus on Jesus ascending into heaven so much as on the community he leaves behind. Pay special attention to what Jesus tells them to do before he goes.

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ 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.”⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.¹¹ 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.”

So what did Jesus tell them to do? Wasn't it to go to Jerusalem, then to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth?

Well, no. That *is* what he says will eventually happen, but what he wants them to do right now is “Go home.” “Go home to Jerusalem and wait. Wait till the time is right and you're ready. Wait for the Holy Spirit to lead you into the streets of Jerusalem, then wait for the Holy Spirit to lead you to the rest of Israel and Samaria. Then wait for the Holy Spirit to lead you to all the world.”

I bet waiting sounded good to those followers. Look at what they've been through. The messiah who was to usher in a new kingdom was arrested, tortured and killed. Then, crazy reports by women turned out to be true. Jesus was alive again and spent time with them. Now he has left them promising to return in spirit to guide them. That's a lot to take in. They are confused, excited, scared, motivated, uncertain... Whatever they were, I bet waiting didn't sound too bad.

However, Jesus does not want them to wait passively. There is a difference between active and passive waiting. It's the difference

- between studying and not studying for Friday's exam,
- between preparing or not preparing for the baby to be brought home from the hospital,
- between boarding windows and not boarding them while waiting for the hurricane to make landfall,
- between building community or not building community while waiting for what life will bring.

Jesus wants them to be actively build their community while they wait for the Holy Spirit to guide them. You can read about how they actively wait in this chapter and the next. They organize themselves, like naming a replacement for Judas. They spend time together, eat together and worship together. They study the scriptures and learn from the disciples. They pool resources to deal with needs. They wait, but it is active waiting

The church today is under a lot of pressure not to wait. Why waste time with being together, with studying scripture and theology, with worship when there are so many needs to be met and so much to do? And in this secular age, there is pressure on the church to prove God's existence to those who do not believe and justify its own to those who are spiritual but not religious.

Before I organize a pity party for the church, though, I have to say that the church is not alone in feeling this pressure. The world is impatient.



- Coaches feel the pressure to win right away.
- Politicians feel the pressure to provide the answers to really difficult problems,
 - and legislatures feel the pressure to pass laws that will make problems go away,
- Physicians feel the pressure to heal when the best they can do is treat.
- Non-profits feel the pressure to eradicate whatever social problem they were created to address,
- Goodness, parents feel the pressure to always get it right.

No time to wait.

The problem is that so many mess up when they give into the pressure and promise more than they can deliver or offer answers that make the problems worse.

Sometimes- many times- active waiting is the best one can do.

Not passive waiting.

- avoiding your responsibility hoping someone else will step up.
- living in denial and pretending that there are not challenges ahead.

Active waiting is what is called for, which is this: attending to what is important *right now* rather than rushing to *what's next* when it is not time.

That is important for everyone who wants to live well, and every institution that wants to add value rather than harm to this world: a family, a team, a legislative body, a business, a country.

Now that I am clear that I am not trying to organize a pity party for the church, I am going to go back to the church because it is to the church that Jesus is speaking in our passage. The church that the world needs has to be the church that often lets an impatient world down. The church the world needs has to resist the pressure to give the world what the world often demands from it: instant answers and miracle cures.

I'll try to paint a picture of what I mean with some conversations I often have. I am in no danger of violating any confidences because I have these conversations a lot- with visitors, with members, with strangers on airplanes and at my assigned table at social functions.

They are the "Prove-It-Conversations... the "Prove-There-Is-A-God-Conversations." Those are modern conversations. In Denmark, there is a statue to the first known atheist, which shows how rare they once were in an enchanted age when people sensed powers and spirits everywhere. But the scientific age- largely inspired and fueled by people of faith- by the way- has created this expectation that God's existence can be proven or disproven by evidence and arguments. So, there are those times when someone who knows I'm a minister, or who finds out I'm a minister, wants me to provide proof that God exists. I was a philosophy major *who made As in my philosophy classes*, but those debates are unwinnable by either side. Faith comes of a relationship with God. Or as our passage would put it, faith comes when the Holy Spirit comes. I believe in God because I'm loved by God. As a philosophical proof, that's a circular argument. But as a witness to experience, it is a confession of faith.



The only thing I could say in those debates is the one thing the impatient person doesn't want to hear. Wait. Wait actively with an open mind, but even more an open heart. Be open

- to the mysterious,
 - to wonder;
- To a greater love reaching you through earthy love;
- To a passion to be ignited in you for those passions of a God who cares about widows and who won't allow the world's wrongs to have the final say.

Be open to being a part of a healthy community where this conversation is ongoing, a community that shows a love for this God in the way they love each other and in the way they serve in the world and see if that very God doesn't reach you.

But, "Wait!" is not what they want to hear.

I have other conversations, though, where people come to me wanting to know that God exists for real, personal, reasons.

- Maybe she misses the God of her childhood church.
- Or maybe he didn't grow up in the church but wants to know what he is missing... because he's missing *something*.
- Or maybe there has been a loss, a disillusionment, a betrayal, a death. Something or someone she counted on let her down and she wants to know if God let her down...
 - or maybe she wants to know if God can lift her back up

That kind of conversation isn't a debate. It's a form of prayer. It is an active search and thus a form of active waiting. The mind is open because the heart is yearning.

Still, there can be impatience here. Because the conversation is more than about a riddle to be solved to hurt to be healed or a void to be filled, the impatience may be even stronger. So, even here, demanding to know "[What's next?](#)" can damage the Right Now. Healing doesn't happen all in a moment. I can hear the Jesus of our passage saying, "You need to calm down. You're being too loud." Because maybe *the answer is not in the answers*. Maybe the answer, for now... for *right now*... is in the conversation. It is in the confessing, the sharing, the caring of the relationship. Expand that relationship into a network of relationships, and it becomes the community's confessing, and sharing, and caring, and what you might have is a community waiting for the Holy Spirit to come.

I need to take this just a bit further because there might be one or two people listening—perhaps online— who can't be reached unless my reach is longer. When one is traumatized by tragedy— I won't give examples—you can come up with them—waiting can be almost unbearable. Yet, I don't know of many who have entered the front door of a tragedy and come out that day right as rain again. The worst choices in those situations come of impatience; to get it over with, get past it too quickly. When being happy is not going to be in the cards for a while, one can at



least be about the active work of waiting in focusing on doing what one can do right now to be healthy while waiting for happy to return. And, again, one needs the company of trusted others who will wait for healing with you.

I am going to pull back again and tell you about other conversations I've had. Again, it is with people seeking answers, only their question is not about God but about God's will for their lives.

- Maybe, they are Juniors and Seniors in High School and they are wondering what they are going to do with their lives.
- Maybe they have raised children and are wondering who they are now that their children live in other places.
- Maybe they found so much purpose in taking care of someone else that they now wonder what their purpose is now that the one they cared for is gone.
- Maybe they are retired long enough that they've gotten past the vacation phase to the “[What is my life about now?](#)” phase.

Here is how that conversation can go wrong when it becomes impatient. The conversation about direction becomes a conversation about what to do next. The one searching asks if there is anything that needs to be done in the church or asks where she might be helpful in the community. The one being asked- me- responds with ideas.

- We could use more visitors (we need two more right now, by the way).
- We could use more volunteers at the front desk (we could).
- The church needs teachers and committee members (yes we do).
- Habitat for Humanity needs workers, Family Promise needs hosts, children need tutors and advocates (all true).

What is being missed? When the question behind “[What am I to do next?](#)” really is the question, “[Who am I now supposed to be?](#)” what is missed is that we may need to wait for the Holy Spirit's guidance that has more to do with being than doing.

Actively wait. Invest yourself in a community of those who will wait with you. Be open. Listen. Try things. And since I'm talking about the church, I'll add, worship, learn, pray, be there for others, and meet needs when you can. You see, so often the direction one is looking for is not found in isolation. It is found in being a part of a community of people seeking direction together while waiting for the Holy Spirit to provide it. It is so often in relationship with others, and with God, that life finds its purpose and hope.

Now, even as a preacher, I'll be the first to tell you that church is not the only community where one finds hope in its life. There are communities of friends and family, and other kinds of communities in whose life hope can be found. Our theologians have told us that the true church is



invisible because connection with a loving God and a loving connection with others can come in all kinds of ways.

But I will say this about a healthy church. When I invest in the active waiting of a community that worships, studies, breaks bread in fellowship and looks to minister to each other's needs and the world's, I have found that I have invested in a living hope. I gain some understanding of why a healthy church can be called "The Body of Christ." It is not because the church has all the answers that Jesus has or is as good as Jesus is or as powerful as Jesus. It simply means this: while we wait for clarity, we can find comfort. While we wait for direction, we can find presence. While we wait for what's next, we can find people who care about us right now.

And then we have been prepared for when the Holy Spirit brings healing, or clarity, or even direction about what's next.

A final word. This sermon took a different direction from where I thought it would go when I first started writing it. This sermon did not come easily. (Well, most sermons don't come easily. Talk about waiting! Why can't the Holy Spirit hurry up). When I began, I really had Second Presbyterian Church more in mind. I wanted to make a case that Second Presbyterian is more successful in its doing when it is faithful in its waiting.

- Once upon a time, we wanted to find a way to be involved in medical missions. Thank God we slowed down because we would have done far less in Peru where we first went than in the Dominican Republic.
- Once upon a time, we wanted to put in an elevator in a stairwell. Thank God we slowed down for five years, so we could build Kirk Hall instead.
- Once upon a time, we thought that our staff had to be a certain kind of way. Thank God, we were patient in building the staff we have.
- Once upon a time, we thought that a pandemic needed to be survived. Thank God that we found a way to wait actively; remain a fellowship even while apart, and that we could become a church that learned to worship in a different way and do outreach ministry at a level we did not imagine was possible before.
- And thank God we don't insist on quickly saying more than we understand about issues like racism, homelessness, refugees and affordable health care and housing, but were patient enough to find enough common ground to be able to do something about them.

But, as you heard, the sermon went in a more personal, and less institutional, direction. That is because the hope I find in the life of the church is so much more personal than in what the church does. The hope is grounded in the life of a community that knows how to actively wait. It is a church

- that stops working to worship,
- that prays for what we are waiting on,
- that enjoys fellowship and shows care,



and miraculously so often finds within itself what it was waiting for- healing, direction, love, and, if not answers, at least some wisdom and understanding.

