

‘WAIT, THEN WITNESS
A SERMON BASED ON ACTS 1:1-11
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, APRIL 19, 2020
10:00 a.m.

It happened near Los Angeles, California in 1982, and it is a true story.

Larry Walters’s boyhood dream was to fly.

He joined the Air Force,
but his poor eyesight
disqualified him from his dream job of pilot.

After he was discharged from the military,
he sat in his backyard watching jets fly overhead.

Then one day, Larry had an idea. He could fly.

He went down to the local ArmyNavy surplus store
and bought forty-five weather balloons,
and several tanks of helium.

Back in his yard,

Larry used straps to attach the four foot diameter balloons
to what was

in his words, his 'extremely comfortable Sears' lawn chair.

He anchored the chair to the bumper of his jeep,

and inflated the balloons with helium.

Then he strapped himself into his lawn chair

with some sandwiches, Miller Lite, and a pellet gun.

He figured he would pop a few of the many balloons

when it was time to descend.

Larry's plan was to cut the cord attached to the jeep

and lazily float up to a height of about 30 feet above his back yard, where

he would enjoy a few hours of flight

before coming back down.

But things didn't work out quite as Larry planned.

When his friends cut the cord anchoring the lawn chair to his Jeep,

he did not float lazily up to 30 feet.

Instead, he streaked into the LA sky as if shot from a cannon,

pulled by the lift of 45 balloons

holding 33 cubic feet of helium each.

He didn't level off at 100 feet, nor did he level off at 1000 feet.

After climbing and climbing, he levelled off at 16,000 feet.

At that height he felt he couldn't risk shooting any of the balloons,

lest he unbalance the load and really find himself in trouble.

So he stayed there, drifting, cold and frightened

with his beer and sandwiches, for more than 14 hours.

He drifted into the primary approach corridor

of LAX, Los Angeles International Airport,

where both Trans World Airlines and Delta Airlines pilots

radioed reports into the tower

about passing a guy in a lawn chair at sixteen thousand feet,

with a gun in his lap.

Eventually Larry gathered the nerve to shoot a few balloons,

and slowly descended.

The hanging tethers tangled and caught in a power line,

blacking out a Long Beach neighborhood for 20 minutes.

With the power out, Larry climbed to safety,

where he was arrested by waiting members

of the Los Angeles Police Department.

As he was led away in handcuffs,

a reporter dispatched to cover the daring rescue

called out, 'why'd you do it?'

Larry replied nonchalantly, "A man can't just sit around."

A person can't just sit around.

Over a month into the 'stay at home' order,

with the kids,

or your spouse,

or by yourself,

at this point,

a lawn chair and 45 balloons may have crossed your mind

as something interesting worth trying.

A nice project.

You'd be socially isolated.

It's something to do other than make banana bread.

Or start another puzzle.

A person can't just sit around.

The weeks following Easter are a natural time to think about
the life of the church.

What happens to a person,

or to the people who are followers of Jesus

when they have seen and come to believe

that Jesus lives?

How does a person's life change when you live your days

with a knowledge that sin and death

did not have final say over Jesus,

and by his grace, neither do they have final say over us?

Is life different after Easter?

It feels like it should be.

Surely we don't just sit around.

When I read today's text,

I'm always most excited about verse eight,

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you."

You will receive power.

When you are at home feeling powerless,
the promise of power is pretty attractive.
Power lets you get thing done.
Power to stop the virus.
Power to protect the vulnerable and essential workers.
Power to undo some of the horrible things that have happened.
Power to go backward and warn our future selves
about decisions months ago
that would have impact today.
Don't book that.
Don't travel there.
Maybe hold off on the big purchase.
Get your investments moved.
Receiving power sounds so much better
than just sitting around.

But the resurrected Jesus' instructions here are intriguing.

Read carefully.

I checked some Greek phrases and words.

I consulted with some scholars who write books about these things.

As I studied,

I came to the shocking realization there is only one thing
the disciples are literally commanded by Jesus to do in this passage.

The disciples had only one direct order to carry out.

Wait.

Don't leave Jerusalem.

The gospel of Luke and Acts were written together,

two volumes, one work, written by one author.

So if you read through from Acts,

you will discover that this one direct command
is said twice.

The gospel of Luke finishes with the same direct command.

Wait. Stay in the city.

But a person can't just sit around, can they?

Waiting makes me skittish.

I don't like waiting.

Remember back in the day when we used to go into the bank?

There were those times I needed a teller.

But you'd end up in a line.

With other people.

Oh the good old days, other people.

Now we measure the wait into the grocery store by hundreds of feet.

I am always prone to the posture of not wanting to wait.

A person can't just sit around, stand around, wait around.

Waiting in line.

Waiting at home.

Waiting for a storm to pass.

Waiting for normal to return.

Waiting isn't the plan.

It's hard for me to wait.

I tend to equate waiting with being lazy.

Waiting seems like doing nothing to me.

I always take a book to the waiting room.

Waiting should not be wasted time.

Get some of my reading done.

For me, waiting feels like an excuse

for not working hard,

not making things happen.

Waiting can seem like a waste.

Seems like what those who are scared of trying do.

Wait. For the right time, the right circumstance,

the right feeling, the right message from God.

To begin the story of the life of the church with the command - wait,

appears counter-intuitive.

Jesus just rose from the dead.

His followers, the women and the men saw him.

The life of the church should begin with a starter's pistol,

with the light turning green,

with the gate flung open.

Go.

Not - wait.

A person can't just sit around.

William Brosend is a preacher who points out,

it is Cleopas and his companion who get all the credit.

These two disciples were walking the road to Emmaus,

when Jesus showed up and walked with them.

They get all the notice.

Everyone preaches about an 'Emmaus road experience'.

Nobody preaches about a

'stayed in Jerusalem and waited to see what would happen'

experience.

Which, he says,

goes to show that 'staying put' rarely gets much credit.

Stay, wait.

Everything about our culture seems to say 'get moving.'

Here Jesus commands, "Stay put."

For many of us right now.

All it took was a pandemic for us to obey that command.

I am guilty at times of looking at people

who tell me they are waiting on God,

as avoiding work, or as being lazy, or fearful to try.

This perspective says more about me than them.

Mostly because I see that,

I am loathe to wait myself,

because I don't want to be seen as avoiding work,

or being lazy,

or being fearful to try.

Because those are temptations of mine,

working hard to prove I'm not lazy, to prove I'm not scared,

working to show that I'm up to the challenge.

I am at the very great and very real risk,

of forgetting God's love for me

which is grace given separate from anything I've accomplished,

which is grace given separate

from me showing myself worthy,

proving myself.

Because I am tempted to work for my sense of worth,

and I think it's more common than just me,

waiting seems especially distasteful.

There is no glory in waiting.

Staying put rarely gets much credit.

Which I think,

is exactly the point of this passage.

We are so very vulnerable to making it all about us.

We tend to be divas.

Thinking that life is built around us.

After all, just like the headlining star,

you are in every scene of your life.

Sleeping, having breakfast, watching the news,

coming to worship, going to work, sitting in class,

driving in the car,

yours is the starring role,

yours is every scene.

Your spouse, your children, your friends, your colleagues, your neighbours

get supporting roles to what you are doing.

We are so very vulnerable to putting Jesus into a supporting role.

At thirty two minutes into the movie he appears

for a Sunday morning cameo.

We are so very vulnerable to thinking it is about us.

Which is why the command, wait, is a message of grace.

A gift.

You are not in the lead role.

Chapter one, verse one of the book of Acts, Luke says

'In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus

began to do and to teach, Jesus in the lead role,

this book of Acts, by implication,

is what Jesus continues to do and teach.

Wait.

The disciples are told to sit offstage.

It is an act of grace, a reminder of who has the lead role,

the blessing of knowing that this story is not

your story, but God's story.

God leads, directs, and empowers the story.

Waiting is the chance to give up the belief it all rests on you,
depends on you,
needs you.

Wait is a command filled with grace for all of us who are trying too hard,
who think a person can't just sit around,
who think God's kingdom won't advance without us,
who think God has abdicated,
leaving us on stage alone,
who think that we have to perform to make the kingdom happen,
who think it all depends on us,
who will tie balloons to a chair if that's what it takes to fly.

This is why I adore Acts 1.

Acts 1 is what I call a border passage.

It is a passage that once you pass through it,
once you go over its bridge,
you are in different territory.

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, gives us some clues

that we are moving into new territory.

First he tells us that his former book was about what Jesus
began to do and teach.

Implying that this book, is the continuation of what Jesus began.
It is new territory, yet the continuation of Jesus' work.

The second clue is the fact that the resurrected Jesus
appeared to the disciples over a period of 40 days.
40 days is the Bible's gestation period.

If I said, that's going to take 9 months before it's ready,
you might hear the echo of how long a pregnancy is.

When you hear the phrase '40 days' in the Bible,
you can be pretty sure something is pregnant.

Something new is coming on the other side of that time.

After Noah built the ark,
it rained 40 days and 40 nights.
It was a new beginning for God and his people.

Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days

when he received the 10 commandments and brought them down
to the people,

transforming how they would be in relationship with their God.

Jesus was in the desert 40 days before he declared his ministry in

Nazareth,

chose his disciples,

and began to preach and heal.

And here,

in the book of Acts,

the disciples have 40 days of encounters with Jesus.

It is the pause, the bridge, before crossing into the new territory.

Before the birth of a new thing, the next thing.

While pregnant, in that 40 days,

Jesus has given the instruction to the disciples to wait.

Don't go yet.

Do not leave Jerusalem

but wait for the gift my Father promised

which you have heard me speak about.

John baptized with water.

But in a few days,

you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

It will be new territory for you.

Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth.

Wait.

And you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

Then you will be called to testify.

Then you will be my witnesses.

The opening command for the church,

was wait, the disciples did, devoting themselves to prayer.

Wait.

This is God's show.

His is the leading role.

God leads, directs, and empowers the story.

Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength.

They are the ones will run and not grow weary.

The ones who wait on the Lord will walk and not be faint.

They will soar on wings like eagles.

When the Holy Spirit comes,

when the Holy Spirit directs,

With power and direction in your performance

the power and direction of God,

rather than aimless drifting in a chair aimed for the sky.

You are in an in between time right now.

There was what came before,

and what life was like before.

There is going to be an after,

when we return to whatever our days will look like.

The thing is.

This kind of time was something God built in to the system.

We've ignored it.

I am old enough to remember a time.

When we shut down the economy, once a week.

Stores were closed.

Businesses were closed.

Factories shut down.

Kids sports teams didn't play.

We shut it down once every week.

We called it Sunday.

Churchland called it a Sabbath.

It was a day of wait, do nothing, for many, a day to worship.

It is God's equivalent of turn it off and turn it on again so you can reboot.

If you read in the Old Testament,

there is in there what is called the Sabbatical year.

Every seventh year, the fields are to be left fallow to rest.

The land is to be given a year to rest.

Then, in the 50th year,

The seventh cycle of seven years is the year of Jubilee.

It is a year of freedom,

the cancellation of debt,

family property is to be returned to families,

debts are to be forgiven.

The people ask in the Old Testament,

'What will we eat in the seventh year if we don't plant or harvest?'

God says, I've got you.

It is always a bit of temptation for me to throw out a

'told you so', when people find out their new discovery

that's been in the Bible for thousands of years.

But here's one.

You can turn everything off, including the economy,

one day a week, and be okay.

Maybe even better than okay.

Pollution has cleared when we took a break

from working, travelling and consuming 24/7.

Jesus first resurrection command was "Wait."

Turn it off. Turn it on again.

Rest. Reboot.

Let the next thing gestate.

Don't take the posture that somehow

you will be the one who has to bring the kingdom.

Wait for the gift my Father promised, the Holy Spirit.

A time of waiting is not a curse.

It is a gift.

What grows in you during this time of waiting could be just sitting around,

being bored, trying to distract yourself with a chair aimed for the sky,

or it can be a time to wait, a time of gestation

a waiting on the Lord,

that allows your life of faith to grow,

prepare and develop,

for what God will do next.

When people see your hope and patience

in the face of challenge and pain.

When the gift and the power of the Holy Spirit come upon you

you will be called up to give witness

to what, and who, is giving you strength to get through this time,

to what and who is inspiring the difference
you have been called to make,
which came out of your turned off and turned on again
time with God.

When people see your character of
patience and kindness and self-control,
in a world that isn't patient, kind or self-controlled,
when people see the fruit of the Spirit in you,
they are going to ask you where you got that.

You are Christ's witnesses.

You live the lives of followers of the resurrected Jesus.

You are Easter people who live with hope, and peace,
and trust that God's growing the next thing.

Easter people can wait on what next thing God will do,
in them and through them,

Easter people anticipate and trust God's goodness while waiting.

Amen.