

Living as a disciple of Jesus is like being on a rollercoaster. It has its ups and downs. For example, one minute Peter is walking on the water, the next moment he is sinking down into the waves, and the next moment after that Jesus is lifting him up to Himself. One day the disciples stand next to Jesus as people cheer Him for raising Lazarus from the dead, the next day they hear reports of the Jewish leaders plotting to kill Jesus. They spend an evening eating Passover meal with their Master, the next hour they are running for their lives as soldiers arrest Jesus. The next day, Friday, Jesus dies on a cross but then on Sunday evening He stands before them risen from the dead. Now the resurrected Jesus leaves the earth ascending into heaven. It seems that He is gone for good. Yet He has made two promises. One is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The other is that He will come back.

As modern-day disciples of Jesus this rollercoaster ride continues for us. We have our bad days and then our good days in our faith life. We alternate between illness and health, weakness and strength. We mourn the deaths of loved ones and celebrate the birth of new additions to our families. We are brought low by despair and sadness. We are lifted up by hope and joy. This up and down ride of our Christian lives becomes smoother when we realize that our Lord Jesus is with us every day. His promises to us as disciples are still good for us. Though our risen Lord Jesus has ascended into heaven He has given us His Holy Spirit who makes us witnesses of Jesus' resurrection.

The disciples of Jesus have witnessed His suffering and death. It was incredible pain and disappointment for them to see their Teacher killed so cruelly. But then His resurrection appearances convinced them that they had hitched their wagon to a rising star. The kingdom of God sounds good to them once again. During the next 40 days Jesus again promises them a gift from His Father, that they will be baptized by the Holy Spirit. Finally, the disciples can stand it no longer. On a short walk outside of Jerusalem they ask the question that has been burning within them, “will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Their unspoken question is, “what is our place of honor going to be in this kingdom?”

The resurrected Lord Jesus has called us to be His disciples today. He has claimed us as His own in our holy baptism. He speaks His words of salvation to us in the Bible. He gives us His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins in the Lord's Supper. Now what are we going to ask of our risen Savior? What question is burning within us for Him to answer us? The sinful nature which still clings to us causes our own kingdom expectations to be narrowly focused on this world. "Lord, will You at this time restore my body to youthful health and fitness?" Lord, will You at this time give me that \$200,000 house or new luxury car?" "Lord, will You at this time restore my marriage, find me a new job, and straighten out my mixed-up children?" "Lord, will You at this time restore our society by getting rid of this pandemic and returning life to normal?"

The answer that Jesus gives to His disciples on the Mount of Olives is one He had shared with them before, only His Father knows the times. Jesus does promise them this: "the Holy Spirit will come upon you". He then commands this: "you will be My witnesses to the end of the earth". They will begin that mission in Jerusalem, the very place that had rejected Jesus and sent Him to death by crucifixion.

Then Jesus ascends into heaven. Before their very eyes Jesus goes up with a cloud, the sign of God's presence, taking Him from their sight. The disciples remain frozen in place, staring into the sky, probably wondering, "now what, is the Holy Spirit coming right away?" It is like us watching a fireworks display. We keep staring into the night sky wondering if we have seen the big finish or not. Do we wait for more to happen or do we leave? After a few awkward moments we realize it is over, get into our cars and drive home.

Jesus' disciples have seen something more spectacular than a fireworks display. They have witnessed God Himself returning to His heavenly throne. Who knows how long they would have stood there if God had not sent them His special messengers. Two men in white robes appear. Their heavenly clothing hints at their divine mission. This angelic duo arrive to jumpstart Jesus' disciples into action and to promise them and Jesus will return in like fashion. Until then, these followers of Jesus have their instructions. They are to be witnesses of Jesus to the world, sharing His words, proclaiming His works, and recalling the events of His ministry.

The message of these angels serves as a good reminder for us. We are tempted to stare into the sky waiting for God to do something miraculous in our lives. “I went to church, Lord, now make my week go well.” “I attended Bible class today, Lord, now give me all the answers to life’s questions.” “I prayed, Lord, now make all that I asked for happen for me.” “I obeyed Your will today, Lord, where is the reward for my good deeds?”

But instead of staring up into the sky waiting for God to act for our benefit, we need to remember that our God already has acted on our behalf. He has given us His own Son to be our Savior from sin. Jesus’ life was lived perfectly according to God’s will for us. Jesus has suffered the punishment that our rebellion against God deserved. Jesus has died the eternal death that our deeds have earned. Jesus has risen from the dead to win victory for us over the devil’s fiercest weapon, our physical death. We now walk in the sandals of Jesus’ first disciples. We tell others all that Jesus has done for us.

We share those acts of our God which the first followers of Jesus have recorded for us in the Bible under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We point to our God who became flesh and lived here among us, His own creatures. We speak of our heavenly Master who on the cross became our suffering servant for the forgiveness of our sins. We praise our living Savior who has risen from the dead to promise us eternal life. We look up in hope to Jesus ascended into heaven where He lives and rules eternally.

Though Jesus has ascended, He has not left us all alone. We have His Holy Spirit, a gift given to us through God’s Word and Sacraments which make us His witnesses. We have the promise of the two angels. Jesus will come again. When He does so, we will see Him and live with Him in all of His heavenly glory. And we also have one another. Together as a family of faith we join in worship, as much as we can, and we go out into the world to proclaim forgiveness, new life and eternal salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.