

Ben Lattimer
Stone Church of the Brethren
Sermon
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On Acts 1
Figuring it Out

The day Everett was born didn't exactly go according to script. First of all, he came early. 3 weeks or so. Just like his dad. We'd planned to spend the weekend putting the finishing touches on the nursery and preparing for our boy. Instead we were rushing to the hospital. Unfortunately, when he was ready to be born, his lungs weren't. Also like his father. And so an alarm sounded and a bunch of doctors and nurses swooped into the room, and the next thing I knew we were rushing off down the hall to the NICU.

It took just about a week for his lungs to catch up with the rest of him - and then we were ready to head home. I still remember this moment - we'd been visiting with him there in the little incubator for days. Holding him even with all those tubes and wires. And now the tubes and wires were gone. He was dressed in a tiny little outfit, and buckled into his car seat. And then she said it... The nurse who'd been caring for him looked at us and smiled and said... "Good-bye!"

I remember panicking - thinking - "Wait, what?! You're leaving us in charge? It's an important job! Don't you need to check my credentials or something? I don't actually know anything about caring for a baby!" Sure I'd read some books, we'd taken a class - but this was the real thing! And they were just handing him over to us?! I was terrified...

Our Scripture passage this morning opens a little bit like TV shows used to... You remember, back in the days before you could just stream the whole season in a day - back when you used to have to wait a whole week before you found out what happened next... "Previously on Star Trek..." And then they'd give you a series of clips to remind you what had happened - to remind you where you are in the story.

That's how this one opens. The book of Acts is like "Volume 2" in the story of Luke's account of the Gospel. And so it opens with a reminder to the reader about where we left off at the end of "Volume 1." Luke's Gospel actually ends with Jesus' ascension into the heavens - the same story he retells here at the beginning of Acts.

"After his suffering [Jesus] presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God."

Now here they are and Luke gives us all these echoes to remind us of the rest of the story. They're back in Jerusalem - where Luke's Gospel begins and ends. They're on the Mount of Olives no less - where not so long ago Jesus was betrayed.

We get echoes in this passage of the words spoken at Jesus' baptism, and the two men in white robes, remind us of the messengers at the empty tomb.

But things are about to change...

The disciples still don't get it. We like to think that after Jesus' resurrection, at the end of the Gospel story all the pieces came together and everything made sense. But here in the beginning of Acts, we find them just as confused as ever.

This is actually quite comforting to me. The illusion that the first Christians, the early church, had it all figured out can so easily slide into the dangerous thinking that *we've* got it figured out. *They* had it figured out, and *we* are being like them so we can have it figured out too...

But that's not the way the story goes - throughout the whole book of Acts and beyond... The early church doesn't have it figured out - they are *figuring it out* - and that gives us permission to be *figuring it out* too. Little by little, block by block, they and we are building the kingdom of God together.

The disciples ask Jesus: "So... Is this the time when you're going to restore the kingdom of Israel?" They're stuck on Palm Sunday and the big parade - still waiting for the overthrow of Rome and the kingdom they were expecting. The detour through the cross threw them for a loop of course - but now Jesus is back! And he's called them all together. Maybe this is it? "Is this the time when it happens?" Like kids on a road trip asking, "Are we there yet?"

And Jesus says, "None of your business... :-) It's not for you to know the times... Don't worry about when. Just do the work - because I've got a job for you... You will be my witnesses [*with hand gestures*] in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth... The Gospel rippling outward like a shockwave from the epicenter out to the ends of the earth...

The end of the passage gives us the names of these followers of Jesus. It's like a title sequence - introducing the characters we're going to be following throughout Luke's Volume 2 - because the camera is shifting. In volume 1 it was on Jesus and these others were in his wake. But now the camera is shifting - moving on to them . - these men and women - who will bear witness to the good news.

In some ways they are starting from scratch... They have no idea what they're doing... I bet they were terrified...

Cindy reminded me the other day how we made it through - back when we brought Everett home for the first time. We had this great pediatrician, Dr. Laube. She'd been doing this a long time. She stopped in with us before we left the hospital. I probably expressed some of my terror, and she smiled - a bit too calmly I thought given the dire nature of the situation. She said, "You can do this. You just have to make it to tomorrow when you're going to see me at my office. The appointment is already on the books. Here's what you need to know

to make it through the next 24 hours.” And the next day at her office, she said, “You did great. You just have to make it the next 3 days. I’ll see you back here then. Here’s what you need to know to make it through the next 3 days...”

We weren’t alone. I *felt* alone. But we weren’t. And it wasn’t just Dr. Laube. We had each other. And our parents. And a whole church family there in Lancaster that loved us too.

This is what Jesus tells the disciples - when they are terrified. “Wait, what?! You’re leaving us in charge? It’s an important job! We don’t actually know anything about carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth!” And so, Jesus tells them what to do to get through the first few days - he tells them, they can do this. He tells them to go back to Jerusalem and to wait - that the Holy Spirit is coming “not many days from now”. They are not alone.

And when they go - they’ve got each other. The whole lot of them - men and women - disciples of Jesus, devoting themselves to prayer together.

With Jesus’ ascension, the story passes on to them - and on to us. As William Loader says it: “You and I are the place of the promise of the kingdom now. Yet ultimately the kingdom is God’s reign, God’s effort, God’s gift. We are not asked to usurp God, but to share [in God’s] purpose and by [God’s] Spirit become [God’s] action in the world.”

Amen.