



What Are We to Do Now?

TEXT
Luke 24:44–53

April 23, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

Have you ever been at a point in life when you were unsure about what you were supposed to do next? Maybe there has been a time when the completely unexpected happened, and you were not prepared to deal with it. Or maybe it was a time that you had looked forward to, but when you got there, you realized you didn't know what was needed or if you even had the capability to rise to the occasion.

One of the biggest moments like that for me was when I left for college. I had decided I wanted to go to school where I didn't know a single person and was far away from home: a 10-hour drive came to be my minimum safe distance.

I had always been both a stubborn and independent kid, and I wanted to somehow prove to the world that I could manage my own life without a safety net, as it were — which is a ridiculous notion when my parents were paying for my tuition, meals were being prepared and cleaned up for me in the dining hall, and I took no classes starting before 9:30 in the morning.

I had some notion of what college would be like, but the

curve ball was that I had also decided to run cross country, and Lawrence University was on a quarter system — that means classes didn't start until late September. Fall sports, however, started in August because we had to begin training when the semester schools did.

So at the start of my freshman year, I drove up to campus by myself to meet the other Fall athletes as we all began pre-season two-a-day practices. The school housed all the athletes in a single dorm for pre-season, and most of the other sports had enough players that they had roommates. Cross country, however, was tiny that year with only seven guys on the team, so we each had our own room. That might sound great, but as it turned out, it was the worst.

For two weeks it felt like I lived the same day over and over. I got up, ate breakfast, ran, ate lunch, took a nap, ran, ate dinner, and went back to my room to be alone and stare at the ceiling and listen to Sarah McLachlan on my stereo. If you don't know who Sarah McLachlan is, think of those commercials on TV asking you to adopt a dog; and they play that song in the background that makes you want to cry uncontrollably and

adopt *all* the animals? That song is by Sarah McLachlan, and it did me no favors in making me feel less alone.

That was my life: sitting in my room and feeling like I was stuck and abandoned.

Every night I would get incredibly lonely and debated just how miserable I needed to be before I decided this was a terrible idea — that I should quit cross country and start considering transferring schools.

Sometimes life can feel less like you are waiting, and more like you have been left. Our text today offers us a word of hope in moments like that. We find the disciples in their last encounter with Christ, ending with the quick version of the ascension (the longer version will be in Acts, which we will read next week).

In this Lukan version, all these events — the resurrection, encounters with the risen Jesus and the ascension — all happen in the same day. It's fast-paced, and scholars think it might have been written for a single Easter-day worship service.

That may be, but to me there is something in this speedy narrative that feels very much like real life. In a single weekend, the disciples had seen Jesus

killed, discovered the empty tomb, encountered the risen Christ, and then watched as Christ ascended. Life can go from exciting to normal, and from normal to tragic so quickly. We live in a world and a culture that moves so fast. The disciples were surely asking the same thing we can ask ourselves each and every morning: What am I to do now?

In 2010 a group at Harvard did a study to figure out what people were thinking and feeling. They created an app for phones, and they had 250,000 data points from over 2,000 people ranging from ages 18 to 88. They could buzz people's phones at random, and people were to then respond with what they were doing, what they were thinking and how they were feeling.

As it turns out, whatever it is we are doing, we are often thinking about something else. In fact, the researchers found that 50 percent of the time people were worrying either about something they had done in the past or about something that was coming up in the future. And more than that, they found that when the mind wanders in this way, it makes people unhappy. This is true so much that the authors of the study write, "A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. The ability to think about what is not happening is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost."¹ Simply put, we spend a lot of time thinking about what is *not* going on around us.

So as Jesus departs, he tells them they are not just to launch out on their own; they, and we, are to trust and wait on the work of the Holy Spirit. There is, after all, a difference between a time to wait for God and a time to work for God. They are to wait. And it might do us some good to look at what they do while they wait. What is it that they do, and how do they keep their minds from wandering while they wonder what is to come next?

They had a lot of things they *could* have done. They could have gone to Jerusalem and simply done nothing. They could have gone their separate ways. They could have waited for a while and then decided nothing was going to happen. But they went to Jerusalem with great joy, and while they waited, they spent time *together* and *worshipped*. Somehow they got this part right.

So, I'll confess to you: I'm terrible about waiting. I'll become a father sometime around July 20, and waiting for that feels like it's taking forever.

There are moments when I feel like I'm waiting on God to show up, and I get very demanding — so much so that I start *telling* God to make me feel God's presence right *now*.

In that much, at least, I'm not the only one.

David Kinnamon, in his book *You Lost Me*, talks about the struggle of many young adults who don't feel God's presence. Based on research, when we don't feel God's presence, the temptation is to sit around wondering when God

will show up. Kinnamon's research revealed that instead of sitting, we do better to serve with and for others as we work through difficult moments in faith. Go to worship. Go and serve. Go and be with others in a faith community. Go and do *something* and do it with and among a community.²

The text reinforces that. Christ departs from the disciples with instruction to *go* with the power of the Holy Spirit — to go in partnership with God, and preach a suffering and dying Messiah to all people without distinction. They are called to go and do.

That instruction is no less challenging for us today, for we *still* struggle to proclaim a suffering and risen Messiah, while accepting all people equally into the church.

But as we struggle, we must hold to the truth that Jesus ascends not to *leave* us, but to *guide* us. Jesus continues to show us the way, and departs with a blessing and promises to equip us, to give us the gift of being together as the church.

It is perhaps foundational to our faith that as believers, we must (1) worship consistently and (2) be together.

So, back to my dorm room, August 1997, Sarah McLachlan on the stereo.

After two weeks of mind-wandering, wondering if I was where I was supposed to be, I was at breakfast on a Sunday, wondering if I could make it back to Kansas City by dinner if I started driving after I finished. I barely noticed that someone

had sat across from me. Pete was in the room across from mine and was another freshman runner. He was also by far the best runner on the team, which lent him an air of unapproachability.

We hadn't really talked before, so I was more surprised by his question, "Hey, do you sit around in your room a lot?"

"Yeah."

"Me, too! It's the worst!"

That morning, two things happened. First, Pete and I decided we were going to be friends (we later roomed together for two years, and were at each other's weddings). We also decided we would become the unofficial social committee for the cross country team. We would plan activities to do in the evenings so everyone could get to know each other. And more than that, we swore that no freshman joining the team would ever go through the loneliness we had felt those first two weeks. Each year for pre-season, we made sure everyone felt like they were showing up to their new family.

By the time we graduated, the team had grown to nearly 30 guys. I don't think that had anything to do with the running. I think it had to do with being together and creating a group that knew that whatever life — or college life, anyway — was going to throw at us, there was a community of support. We were going to be together — not alone — and not just at practice, but in the waiting and in the doing of life.

Christ has ascended and has left us the Holy Spirit to empow-

er us in our work and worship in this world, and I firmly believe that happens best in the context of community. It happens best when we are together.

The call, and the challenge, is to live forever toward that promised day — the day when Christ returns. But until that day, each new day we are asking ourselves, "What now? What next?" Trusting in God's love for us as we partner together to respond, knowing that whatever is next, we are not, and should not be, alone. We find renewal in our worship and in our fellowship with one another.

Next week we will begin walking through the book of Acts together. Scholars tell us the same author who wrote Luke's gospel wrote Acts, so Acts picks up just after the verses we read today and describes the journey of the disciples after Jesus ascends. They faced a world without the person they had depended on, and I imagine there was no small amount of wondering and figuring things out as they went along.

But I also know they did some things right.

Being together is one of the central elements of the book of Acts. If the Gospels tell the story of Jesus and his ministry and resurrection, Acts is the story of what happens after. It is the story of what happens through God's people, and it is not a story of words alone, but of love in deeds: It is both proclaimed and lived out.

They trusted in their friend and Savior Jesus Christ, and they did not walk through chal-

lenges alone. We, too, are being healed, transformed, liberated and sent because of the commission of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit of God.

If we worship God with joy, and do so alongside each other — bearing one another's burdens and encouraging each other — we will do some things right as well.

Let's pray together.

¹<http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/11/wandering-mind-not-a-happy-mind/>

²Kinnamon, David. *You Lost Me*. Baker Books (2011), p. 206.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.