“How do we start?” - Stephanie Sorge, 4.7.24

We’ve been so deeply immersed in the Gospel of Mark, and following last week’s terror and dread, the leap into Acts is a bit jarring. Acts is a sequel to Luke’s gospel, written by the same author and addressed to the same reader - Theophilus, “Lover of God.” If Luke was season one of a show, it ended on a cliffhanger. Acts is season two, picking up where Luke left off. But like some shows, there was an extended break between the conclusion of season one and the premiere of season two, so the writer has to start with a recap. These first few verses tell us how we got here.

In theory, Acts picks up where all of the gospels end. This passage covers the first 40 days after Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection, but it feels worlds away from where we left things in Mark’s gospel. On the other hand, it helps fill out Mark’s story in ways that later editors tried to do in Mark’s gospel itself. Yes, Jesus did appear, multiple times, after his death and resurrection. And then he was truly no longer with them.

Luke’s smooth narrative style makes it almost easy to miss verse 6 and its implications. Those who had gathered together asked Jesus, “Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?” Following the resurrection, and when Luke was writing many decades beyond it, there were still some expectations that Jesus would usher in a new political realm. But Jesus never promised to make Israel great again. Luke tells the story while setting the record straight. Jesus practiced a Holy Spirit-led ministry. The power promised to the disciples isn’t political or military power, but the power of the Holy Spirit. The call is not to be rulers, but apostles, and witnesses to how they have experienced God at work in the world through Jesus Christ. Having refuted that iteration of religious nationalism, Jesus leaves. For real, this time.

Who knows how long they were standing around, looking up? I can imagine what they were thinking. “He’s coming back, right? Like, in a few minutes?” “Maybe it’s an April Fools joke!” “What on earth are we supposed to do now?” “Was anyone taking notes?” “Who’s in charge now?” They might have been there for some time, just waiting, if not for the messengers who arrived. They ask the disciples why they are looking up. Add that to the list of questions with obvious answers. See also: why are you looking for Jesus in the tomb?

The disciples were dealing with what they could observe, in their reality. They saw Jesus go in the tomb, they expected to find his body there. They saw him ascend, so they kept looking up to the sky. The messengers’ questions instead ground them in the new reality. Otherwise, they’d just be stuck. Don’t just stand there looking up at the sky; get on with what you’re supposed to be doing! Which is… what, exactly? We’re still trying to figure that out. What are we supposed to do? And when we figure that out, how do we do it?

Our Easter celebrations tend to be joyful and affirmative. There is a lot of movement and activity. Not much space for pause or doubt. The disciples gathered together after the resurrection, and again after the ascension, but they didn’t do anything. They were still in shock, still experiencing trauma. They weren’t even close to being ready to process it. To some of them, at least, I’d guess that the resurrection didn’t feel like good news. Even if they recognized it as such, in theory, they might not have felt like celebrating it. Though Jesus appeared to many people, and showed many convincing proofs, his presence with them was never the same. He wasn’t with them in the same way, and never would be again, and for those who were close to him over the years, I’d guess that it felt like far more of a loss than a gain.

How do we do this? Matthew and Luke offer instructions: go, and be a witness to people all over the place. They had traveled extensively already. It wasn’t easy. To do it without Jesus would have been especially difficult. To do it while still carrying the grief of loss, and the complexity of trauma? That might have felt impossible. How do we do this?

On Monday, I was pleased to walk into a dry church house the day after Easter, despite the storms of the previous night. Easter Monday lives in my body as a trigger back to 2020, the year that Easter Sunday rainstorms breached the roofing work, turning parts of the church house into peaceful oases of falling water. Peaceful enough, if you could ignore the damage. It’s a memory tightly linked to the early pandemic, too. We had already come through more than a few “How do we do this?” moments, including “How do we celebrate Easter when we can’t safely gather together?” Making it to Easter Monday morning felt like a victory and relief. Until I walked into the church.

Whatever challenges we might face, I’d choose our church and our church leaders, every single time. Our tech team - words simply can’t capture what a gift they were and continue to be. The Session responded immediately, and a COVID Task Force was formed to help us navigate our way through the unknown so well. They were amazing, through all of the twists and turns and the ever-present question, “How do we do this?” And how do we do it well, and compassionately, and with concern for the most vulnerable members of Trinity, Harrisonburg, and beyond?

How do we do this, when everything we know and cherish is changing? COVID was a catalyst for that conversation within church and society, but things had already been changing, for years. The late church historian Phyllis Tickle noted a 500-year cycle of seismic shifts within the world's major religions. According to that cycle, Christianity has been going through another of these, now over 500 years after the Reformation. Counting backward a few cycles, we can see that these early Christians - the ones who gathered in Jerusalem and the ones who were first to receive these writings - were facing similar seismic shifts. Everything around them was changing, and they were left with this new movement and a charge to continue it, all while mourning the one who had come and ignited the flame, changing their lives forever.

Often, when there is new life to celebrate, it’s easy to ignore or diminish the pain and trauma of what has been lost. I think of those earliest friends of Jesus, looking up at the sky wondering, what are we supposed to do now?

We are living through global and seismic changes in Christianity. The church will never be what it once was. Coming out of COVID, there are permanent losses. We’ve lost people, and we’ve lost familiar and comforting ways of being church. In the last couple of years at Trinity, we’ve also sustained profound losses, including the deaths of most of our remaining founding members, and those who were nearly-founding and just as foundational members. Things are changing. We are changing. And last I checked, it seems like life has gotten even more complicated and weighty for most people over the past few years. A quick look at our prayer list can confirm some of that. If you aren’t struggling with something pretty big, you love someone who is.

With everything changing, while we’re still struggling with grief and trauma, individually and collectively, how do we do this? How did the early church?

For a while, they didn’t do much at all. They were stunned into silence, and then they were stuck looking up at the heavens. Finally, they gathered in a room in Jerusalem, where they stayed safely ensconced and isolated from the world outside. Even though that’s not WJWHD - what Jesus would have done. Even with Jesus’s final words, telling them that they would be witnesses, all the way to the end of the earth. They didn’t witness, and they didn’t travel. They stayed where they were, praying together.

Sometimes waiting on the Holy Spirit looks a lot like doing nothing. Prayer often looks a lot like doing nothing. Especially when “thoughts and prayers” are so quick to be uttered without really meaning anything. But that’s how it began. That’s how we began. When everything was coming undone, they stuck together, and they prayed together. When they were on the verge of something big and daunting, they stuck together and they prayed together. When they were waiting on God, they stuck together, and they prayed together.

Jesus’s final words to them sound a lot like the Great Commission from the end of Matthew’s Gospel, but one word is missing from Acts: “Go.” Jesus’s final statement is not imperative. “You will be my witnesses…to the end of the earth.” You will be. This will be. It’s declarative, like the way Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven and the reign of God. This is what it will be like. His declarations are instructive, and help guide us, but we can also find some comfort in the confidence with which he speaks. This is how it will be. It’s not conditional on the amount of work or effort or skill we put into it, or our own success. This is how it will be. The Holy Spirit will guide things to make it so.

Maybe it’s a minor semantic difference, but to me, it feels like some of the weight is lifted. We are invited to participate in God’s work in the world as the body of Christ, but the end doesn’t hinge on what we do or don’t do. It will be. We can trust the Holy Spirit to show us our part and strengthen us for it.

That also means we can declare right back to God: “We don’t know how to do this.” “We’re grieving and hurt, and we don’t have the bandwidth.” “It all feels like too much.” That can all be true. And we can still stick together. We can still pray together. In times when even prayer seems impossible, we can lean on the prayers of others to see us through.

This is how it began. How we began. Followers of Jesus stayed together, prayed together, and waited for the Spirit. It’s how we still start today. May we be held together as the beloved community by the bonds of God’s love, as we wait for the Spirit to strengthen and lead us as the body of Christ. Amen.