

Wait for it
[Acts 1:1-14](#)
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Let's try something a little different this morning. We're going to play a little game – everyone open your hymnals again to the Table of Contents, and look up the hymns that are in the “Ascension/Reign of Christ” Section. Turn to that section, and when you get there, feel free to call out some of the hymn titles in that section – they're hymn numbers 265-275.

Hail the day that sees Christ rise, King of Kings, Rejoice, the Lord is King, All hail King Jesus, Your kingdom come, O God, The head that once was crowned with thorns, Let all the world in every corner sing, Christ is King!, Jesus our mighty Lord, Crown him with many crowns, Jesus shall reign where'er the sun.

So – what do all these hymns have in common, besides being recommended for use today, to celebrate the day of ascension, the day when Jesus ascended into heaven? Well, they're all pretty upbeat – in fact, they're triumphant, celebratory, ecstatic, jubilant! Harps are sounding, Voices are shouting and singing and bursting with exhilaration, everyone's rejoicing and hailing and singing, lots of Crowns and Thrones and Angels celebrating, it's one huge party, everybody's there and they're having the time of their lives, it's the Day of Ascension, and according to the hymnal, the Day of Ascension is a day to celebrate, it's a day to cheer and throw confetti and hoot and holler like a crazy person. And it's not just this hymnal – I checked three other hymnals, and they all have the same vibe in their assigned hymns for the Day of Ascension – it's a party,

Christ the conquering Hero returning to heaven having vanquished sin and death. His work on earth is all finished, so he ascends to heaven, and everyone in heaven is so happy to see him, they can't contain their joy. That's the way we usually talk about the ascension, the way we sing about the ascension, and it is true – Christ ascending to heaven is certainly something to celebrate and sing about. The thing is, when you hear today's scripture reading, the picture you get here isn't really one of celebration and harps and crowns and thrones. It's all very well to sing about how happy heaven is to welcome the triumphant Jesus Christ home, but the scripture reading is more concerned with how the people left on earth felt about it, and they don't seem in the mood for a party.

And you can't really blame them, can you? It has been a whirlwind of emotions and events over the past 50 days since Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday surrounded by his disciples, disciples who all believed that Jesus was about to overthrow the Roman empire and proclaim a new kingdom of peace and justice that would last forever. But then on Friday that dream was destroyed, as their leader was betrayed, arrested, tortured, executed. For three days, the disciples were utterly hopeless, as they tried to hide out long enough to sneak back to Galilee unnoticed, go back to their old lives of fishing and farming. And then, in the greatest surprise of all, there was Sunday morning; the empty tomb, the stories from friends returning to the city, stories that got louder and louder from more and more people, and finally there was Jesus, standing alive in front of them, restored, resurrected to life, and suddenly they had hope again. For the next forty days the disciples lived in a kind of dream, barely able to comprehend what had happened – they thought they'd seen miracles back in the old days, but nothing prepared them for this, the man they saw die alive again, filled with the

power of God. Slowly but surely, the truth sinks in, as the disciples spent more and more time with the Risen Lord, listening to him teach and explain the kingdom of God, preparing them for the future, and now, as their minds finally grasp that Jesus is truly alive, their leader who had been taken away from them was with them again, now their minds begin to turn again to the future. What do we do now? And despite everything, despite all the miraculous events that have happened, despite the fact that they now recognize that the man they have been following is the Son of God, the disciples immediately start thinking about their old plans, their old ambitions. “Lord, will you at this time give the kingdom back to Israel? When you were killed we thought we’d never defeat the Romans, but now that you’ve come back to life, *now* can we start that rebellion?” The disciples don’t seem to realize just how earth-shattering the events of the past two months truly are – the resurrection of Jesus Christ has changed *everything*, but they still want to go back to their old plans. It’s ridiculous to think that the disciples *know* that the Son of God became a human being, lived, taught, suffered, died, and then rose from the dead - he’s standing right in front of them - and they want to put him to work in local politics. It’s like bringing Shakespeare back to life, and asking him to write up your grocery list, or bringing Einstein back so he can teach preschool, or getting Martin Luther King Jr. to run for assistant secretary of your gardening club. The Almighty creator of the Universe who existed before the world began, who shaped the stars and breathed life into humanity, he’s standing right there, and the best plan they can come up with is, hey, let’s gather some peasants and pitchforks together and get in a fight with the local garrison. The disciples are still planning for a future where Jesus keeps solving all their problems, where their goals on earth are met by a heavenly fix-it squad, where

they can sit back and watch as all their plans are fulfilled by Jesus working for them.

So picture this scene, as Jesus and the disciples are walking out in the countryside together, and the disciples are all excitedly talking about the next step they're going to take, all the plans they have, all the work they want to accomplish, and then right there, in the middle of their conversation, Jesus is lifted up, and he ascends into the sky, and the disciples are left standing there, dumbfounded. They can't believe their eyes, and that's saying something, because their eyes have seen some pretty amazing things, but this one tops them all, it leaves them all standing there, staring up at the sky, wondering what on earth has just happened. All their plans, all their political ambitions depended on having Jesus leading the charge, having people see and touch and hear the man they thought was dead, proving beyond a doubt that he was alive. And now he's gone. The roller coaster of emotions these disciples had been on for the past 50 days takes another terrifying lurch. Once already Jesus was taken from them, once already they were plunged into despair and hopelessness, and through the greatest miracle in history Jesus rose from the dead and returned to them and their hope was restored, but now that hope is gone again, sailing up into the sky and out of sight. So I don't think the disciples at this moment would have been in the mood to sing Rejoice – the Lord is King. For the disciples on the ground, the Ascension must have felt like another Good Friday, a moment when their hope and power and source of all strength was suddenly taken from them, and they were left alone.

But not really alone. Before Jesus leaves them, he gives the disciples a promise, a promise that the Holy Spirit will soon descend on them and fill them with power, that his presence will never leave them because his Spirit will be in them. Jesus promises that his Ascension, this second Good Friday, will be followed by a second Easter Sunday on the day of Pentecost. Just as their Lord and Saviour had been taken from them again, he will be resurrected in their lives in a new and powerful way through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Christ promises his followers that even though their hopes and goals and plans for Jesus may fail, Jesus's plans for his followers will never fail, because his Spirit will be at work in them, guiding them, empowering them, strengthening them towards the fulfillment of God's calling in their lives so that they can be witnesses for Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and throughout the world. And Christ offers one more promise to his disciples. As they peer upwards into the sky, hoping against hope that Jesus will come back, two men dressed in white join them on the hill, and they promise the disciples that Jesus will one day return, that their eyes will again see and their hands will again touch their Lord and their God. The disciples thought they knew what to do next, how to make the most out of this resurrection thing, but Jesus promises to them that if they trust him, he will be with them in his Spirit, and he will return one day to right the wrongs of this world and bring in the kingdom, not the kingdom of Israel but the Kingdom of God.

Jesus promises his disciples that the Good Friday of Ascension will be followed by a new Easter on Pentecost, and the amazing thing here is that the disciples actually listen. Before he was arrested and crucified, Jesus promised his disciples that though he would suffer and die, three days later he would return to

life, but the disciples didn't hear that promise, they didn't listen to Jesus' assurances that his separation from them would only be temporary. When Jesus was crucified, they panicked. They went into hiding, they despaired, they gave up all hope. But this time, the disciples hear the promises of Jesus that this separation would only be temporary, that Pentecost was coming, and this time they listen, this time they act in faith – they return to Jerusalem, and they wait. It's not much – Jesus doesn't ask them to prove they deserve his Spirit by going out and doing some magnificent work of devotion or power, he just asks them to wait, wait for the Spirit to act in their lives. It doesn't seem like a difficult task, but considering the disciples' track record and their apparent eagerness to overthrow the Romans, waiting couldn't have been easy. But they do it. They trust in God's promise, they return to Jerusalem, and they wait for the Spirit to transform their futures into lives dedicated to serving Jesus Christ, to carry the good news about Jesus' saving love to the ends of the earth.

And here we are, at one end of the earth far, far removed from the disciples on the day of Ascension, staring into the sky, wondering what might come next. But we're not all that different from them either. All too often in our own lives and in the life of the church we make our own plans and try and fit Jesus into them, we use Jesus as the means to get what we want, we take the almighty creator and lord of the universe and put him to work for our own comfort and prestige. We say we want to grow the church, we want more people in the pews, but do we want this so that more people will come to know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, or so that there'll be more money in the plate so we can stay comfortable and keep doing things the way we've always done them? We say we come to church to encounter and worship and love the God who

created us, but sometimes it becomes more about the church encountering each other rather than encountering God. Any time we try and use our faith to make our own earthly lives more comfortable or pleasant, it never works. But even though we may try to make plans for Jesus, the good news is that no matter what we do, Jesus has plans for us. It may not be an easy road, it may not be a comfortable road, but Jesus is calling us down the road he has chosen for us, and it is a road that leads to glory, a road that leads us to know our God intimately, even as we are known by him, it is a road that leads to a heavenly celebration where we can cast down our crowns before the King of Kings and Rejoice with everlasting praise to our Almighty God. And we do not walk that road alone, because our God sends his Spirit to guide us, to push us and prod us towards the road he has prepared for us, to walk with us and comfort us and pick us up when we stumble and lift our hearts when we despair. The Holy Spirit is with us, the Spirit is ready to work miracles in us, to lead us out of this place to the ends of the earth proclaiming the great things God has done for us. And even though at times that way forward may seem unclear, even though the road seems bumpy and the way seems dark, we have Christ's promise that if we wait on him, if we give ourselves over to his plan for our church and for our lives, his Holy Spirit will descend and lead us on. Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. In the name of Jesus Christ - Amen.