

What Time It Is – Acts 1:1-11

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So both these texts today are chronicles of a major transition that happens in the story of our faith: Jesus ascends into heaven.

It's one of the many supernatural events that happen on Jesus' watch. Besides his miracles—healing, feeding, changing water into wine—Jesus is also centerstage as he's transfigured on the top of that mountain (his clothes became “dazzling white” with Moses and Elijah showing up beside him out of nowhere) and of course there was also that supernatural that is his resurrection from the grave on Easter morning.

The culminating unexplainable act is his departure into the heavens in front of the disciples. It's unexplainable what happens here. And as hard as it is for us to comprehend, his act of departing from them marks the beginning of a new chapter for the disciples. No longer would they see him. No longer would they hear his voice. Now only through the presence of his spirit would they be comforted and instructed and guided in their journey.

This was a momentous act—a move from having Jesus physically by their sides to seeing him departing them.

What would they do in this interim period? What would they do in the in-between time of Jesus being with them to the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? There had to be uncertainty, indecision, confusion, and some impatience.

In fact, before he's taken up into heaven, they asked Jesus, “Is this the time you'll restore the kingdom?” And he tells them,

basically, to wait. “It’s not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set” for such things.

Wait. Times are changing, but wait.

Tumultuous moments like this are not foreign to us. Transitions occur for all of us throughout our lifetimes. Most of the time, they’re no big deal. But sometimes, they are a big deal.

We’re retiring—not going to work anymore like we did for forty or fifty years. That’s big. And that triggers a host of other transitions: like figuring out a new routine, applying for Medicare and Social Security, and being at home with your spouse everyday (maybe the biggest transition of all).

Those other transitions you’ve lived through feel like nothing comparatively. Except they were big deals too: becoming parents for the first time, seeing your kids grow up and leave home, and watching them form their own families.

There’s the transitions for young adults that come, too, like the waiting after a graduation for the next adventure to start, or the loss of employment due to being laid off without a clear path forward. These transitions demand patience and endurance.

And then there’s that ultimate transition of living without a loved one who has died: a spouse, a child, a parent. What do we do then? We ache for the pain to be taken away, but it lingers and lingers and lingers. In these transitions, waiting is excruciating.

Waiting, though, in transition, as difficult as it is, doesn’t necessarily mean doing nothing.

In light of Jesus’ transition to heaven, he reassured his disciples that they would receive power to wait from the Holy Spirit. “You will be my witnesses,” he said, “in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

In the aftermath of this historic and monumental event, they would be his witnesses—while they waited for what was next. And witnessing in this context is not just standing idly by. Being a witness of Jesus means acting in the ways disciples are called to act.

It's what allows us to navigate the very, very choppy waters of big life changes.

What does being Jesus' witnesses involve?

The talk radio host Hugh Hewitt addressed this one day when he wrote in his book *The Embarrassed Believer*, "The most joyful Christians are those who do not worry a bit about what the world thinks but who concern themselves continually with what God thinks. That approach, I assure you, leaves little room for embarrassment.

"But even if embarrassment drops away, there is still a great risk. Fear of personal embarrassment is an obstacle. But fear of embarrassing the church is a great caution. Here's a blunt warning: You can do a lot more harm than good by bold professions of Christian belief at the wrong time, in the wrong place or in the wrong manner.

"And that's the tension. We are called to witness for Christ, but we are warned not to call the church into public disgrace. There is a way to do both. And it requires both some work and a whole bunch of community."

To witness in a way that doesn't bring shame on ourselves or the church is grounded in humility and service. Being faithful witnesses of Christ is grounded in humility and service.

Last night, I was honored to speak at the Farragut High School Baccalaureate service in advance of tonight's Farragut High commencement. And I shared the story of an older

gentleman named Carl, as told by a neighbor of Carl's. And I'd like to share that story this morning, because it speaks to what witnessing—especially in times of difficult transition—can be all about.

Carl was a quiet man. He didn't talk much, but he would always greet you with a big smile and a firm handshake. Even after living in our neighborhood for over 50 years, no one could really say they knew him very well.

Before his retirement, he took the bus to work each morning. The lone sight of him walking down the street often worried us. He had a slight limp from a bullet wound received during his military service. Watching him, we worried that although he had survived war, he may not make it through our changing uptown neighborhood with its ever-increasing random violence, gangs, and drug activity.

When he saw the flier at our local church asking for volunteers to care for the gardens behind the minister's residence, he responded in his characteristically unassuming manner. Without fanfare, he just signed up. He was well into his 87th year when the very thing we had always feared finally happened.

He was just finishing his watering for the day when three "troubled youth" shall I say approached him. Ignoring their attempt to intimidate him, he simply asked, "Would you like a drink from the hose?" The tallest and toughest-looking of the three said, "Yeah, sure," with a hostile little smile.

As Carl offered the hose to him, the other two grabbed Carl's arm, throwing him down. As the hose snaked crazily over the ground, dousing everything in its way, Carl's assailants stole his retirement watch and his wallet, and then fled.

"Carl, are you okay? Are you hurt?" the minister kept asking as he raced from inside his residence to help Carl to his feet. Carl just passed a hand over his brow and sighed, shaking his head. "Just some crazy kids. I hope they'll wise-up someday."

His wet clothes clung to his slight frame as he bent down to pick up the hose. He adjusted the nozzle again and started to water.

Confused and a little concerned, the minister asked, "Carl, what are you doing?"

"I've got to finish my watering. It's been very dry lately," came the calm reply. Satisfying himself that Carl really was all right, the minister could only marvel. Carl was a man from a different time and place.

The summer was quickly fading into fall. Carl was doing some tilling in the garden again one day when he was startled by the sudden approach of someone behind him. He stumbled and fell into some evergreen branches. As he struggled to regain his footing, he turned to see the tall leader of his summer tormentors reaching down for him. He braced himself for the expected attack.

"Don't worry old man, I'm not gonna hurt you this time" he said. The young man spoke softly, offering his scarred hand to Carl. As he helped Carl get up, the young man pulled a crumpled bag from his pocket and handed it to Carl.

"What's this?" Carl asked. "It's your stuff," the man explained. "Even the money in your wallet."

"Why would you help me now?" Carl asked.

"I learned something from you," he said. "I ran with that gang that hurt you. But, instead of yelling and fighting back that day, you tried to give us a drink. You didn't hate us for hating

you. You showed love against our hate." And with that, he walked off down the street.

Carl looked down at the sack in his hands and gingerly opened it. He took out his retirement watch and put it back on his wrist. Opening his wallet, he checked for his wedding photo. He gazed for a moment at the young bride that still smiled back at him from all those years ago.

Carl died on a cold day after Christmas that winter. Many attended his funeral in spite of the weather, including a tall young man sitting quietly in a distant corner of the church. The minister spoke of Carl's garden as a lesson in life. In a voice made thick with unshed tears, he said, "Do your best and make your garden as beautiful as you can. We will never forget Carl and his garden."

The following spring another flyer went up. It read: "Person needed to care for Carl's garden." The flyer went unnoticed by the busy parishioners until one day when a knock was heard at the minister's office door. Opening the door, the minister saw a pair of scarred hands holding the flyer. "I believe this is my job, if you'll have me," the young man said.

The minister recognized him as the same young man who had returned the stolen watch and wallet to Carl. He knew that Carl's kindness had turned this man's life around. As the minister handed him the keys to the garden shed, he said, "Yes, go take care of Carl's garden."

My message last night for the graduates and for all of us is that witnessing is about tending gardens—our gardens, the ones filled with people we love, and others' gardens, including the strangers around us who are our neighbors.

Amid transitions—some of them major in our lives—we sit in them and wait. But even in waiting, we witness. In humility

and service, we witness. In these moments, as well as always, the time is right to be Jesus' witnesses to the world.