

## Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

## *This is the Way*

## Gospel Lesson

Acts 1:1-11 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning <sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup> While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." <sup>9</sup> When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup> They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

## Bible/Sermon Focus

The story of the ascension is strange. The resurrected Jesus has been with the disciples for 40 days, and now is going to leave, promising to send the Spirit to be with them. It is for this reason that there are 40 days between Easter Sunday and Ascension Day, which we celebrate on Ascension Sunday. We've had 40 days with the resurrected Lord, but now it's time for the next thing. And we, like the disciples, may find ourselves standing looking toward the heavens waiting for Jesus to return and be in relationship with us the way he always has been. And we too may need to be shaken out of our trance with the words of the messengers, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

In these words, we hear the call to go out and do the work of God. We hear the assurance that we are fully equipped, right now, to do so. We hear that Jesus is risen and has now ascended, so now go, because the Spirit will come and will guide us in the next steps of our ministry. It must have been a bit terrifying for these disciples to realize that they were *it* now; that the movement, the way, was on their shoulders. But it worked. Because here we are two thousand years later still moving in the way of Christ.

These disciples, inspired by the Spirit, figured out how to be in relationship with God and the community to do the work of establishing the church. This work is not easy, and it's not something that a person can do on their own. We need each other. People need people.

Creating and sustaining the church is relational work. Our God is a relational God. Our existence is a relational existence.

God is relational. The three persons of the Trinity are in relationship with each other; we are in relationship with God, each other, and creation. God works in relationship and the evidence is all around us. The evidence is our lives. Of course, we do not live feeling completely connected to God and one another as if collectively we are all one conscious being. We have subjectivity, and yet, are connected. Connected, and in relationship.

And we, like the disciples, are called to continue to figure out how best to do this relational work together. In the Methodist tradition we have a term that helps describe how we remain in relationship with each other and the world as a church. We describe our church as *connexional* (connectional). "Today, our denomination continues to be organized in a "connectional" system, which "enables us to carry out our mission in unity and strength" (Book of Discipline, ¶ 701). Every local church is linked to an interconnected network of organizations that join together in mission and ministry, allowing us to accomplish far more than any one local church or person could alone." (<https://www.umc.org/en/content/organization-church-as-connection>)

The connexional system of the UMC is one of our most powerful strengths for organizing and getting the mission of the church accomplished. Manchester UMC, as a larger congregation, has a distinct role in the connexion. As we enter into Century 3 as a congregation, we will discern our role in the greater UM connexion. We will not stand looking into the heavens. We will follow the Spirit, as leaders, following the way of Jesus, to embody the Reign of God in all that we are.

## Discussion Questions

1. If "Jesus is the way" means a *way of life* more than a *route to get somewhere* then, describe in your own words the "way of Jesus."
2. How have we gotten ourselves in trouble when we have insisted that *our version* of Jesus is the only "way"?
3. In what ways do you see Manchester UMC as leaders in the connectional system?

## Prayer

God of all ages, we acknowledge that two hundred years as a congregation is a short time in your history. In the same breath we acknowledge the great length that our church has stood among our denomination. Guide us, in your Spirit, to be in connectional in ways that best serve your kingdom and bring about your reign. Amen.

*This is the "way" of Jesus that we are sent into the world to give witness to, empowered by the Holy Spirit to embody the Reign of God in all that we are.*