

May 17, 2026
Ascension Sunday
The Rev. Jack Alvey

“Wait Here”

At 10:00 this past Thursday morning, this room was full of the families and teachers of our sixteen preschool graduates. By 10:30, the Memorial Garden was alive with parents trying to get their child to stop long enough to take a photo to capture a memory for a lifetime.

By 10:40, Ware Hall was buzzing with children who got to have lemonade and cookies before lunch! And by 11:00, the Nave, the Garden, and Ware Hall were deserted and left only a few tangible reminders that something special happened only an hour before.

And I know similar scenes will play out across our city schools this week. Ready or not, summer is upon us!

I spoke with a few parents this past week who aren't quite ready. They are not particularly excited about summer. There is too much unstructured time, they say. And I get that.

The school and extracurricular activities calendar have been setting the agenda for over nine months now. Now our calendars are a lot less flooded with activity. Some of us might find that wonderful. Others of us might find it a little bit daunting. And most of us find it a little of both.

Today, we find Jesus' disciples standing in a similar place. This is their commencement ceremony, of sorts. For three years, they have learned life lessons from their teacher. They've experienced the highest of highs and lowest of lows. They've been on once-in-a-lifetime field trips.

And this is the moment they go from disciples to apostles. They go from those who follow to those who are sent.

But at this commencement ceremony there are no diplomas, no parties, no cookies. Instead of a handshake from the Dean, their teacher rises straight up into the clouds and disappears. Too bad they didn't hire a photographer.

Suddenly, they stand alone on a hillside, between the Ascension and the promise of Pentecost, wondering what happens now.

As you know, today is the Feast of the Ascension. One of the most underrated feast days on the church calendar. We tend to rush right past it on the way to Pentecost.

It doesn't help that the feast always lands on a Thursday. And who goes to church on a Thursday? Unless you are attending a Food Truck Festival!

Ascension Day sees Jesus gather and bless his followers before he is taken from their eyes. But before he goes, he tells them to wait. Wait in Jerusalem for ten days, he says. There they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Unless you're a kid on December 15th, ten days doesn't sound like much. And the number of days isn't really the hard part.

The hard part is that for three years they've had someone to give them directions. Someone who set the agenda. Someone who gave their life purpose and clarity. And suddenly he's gone. And they are left standing there, wondering where to go now.

Ascension Day has always reminded me of a scene in Forrest Gump. Forrest runs for over three years, back and forth across the country, slowly gathering a mass of followers who seem to think he knows where he is going.

And then one day he stops in the middle of the desert, turns around, and says, "I'm pretty tired. I think I'll go home now." And the camera pans to all those followers, just standing there. What are we supposed to do now?, one of them laments.

I imagine the same question is running through the minds of the disciples on that hillside. What are we supposed to do now?

And as they stand there in that liminal space, in that in-between space, I figure they face three temptations in this moment. The temptation to look up. The temptation to look back. The temptation to look ahead.

The first is to look up, to keep their eyes fixed on where Jesus used to be. Like a science class watching an eclipse minus the special glasses, they stand motionless, gawking at the sky. It takes two angels to snap them out of their trance. "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" A question meant to invite curiosity, not shame.

The second is to look back, to bring back the glory days. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" They've walked with the risen Christ for forty days. They've heard him open the scriptures. They've seen him point to a new day. And yet they still want to look backward.

The third is to look ahead, to get where they are going in a hurry. They want to know the schedule. What comes next, and exactly when. But there are no more class schedules. This is real life. And Jesus says, "It is not for you to know the times."

And if we're honest, we do very similar things. We will do anything but stand still in the empty space. It doesn't feel safe here. It feels like we are caught in a run-down between second and third.

Most of us will struggle with the last temptation over the summer. We try to fill the calendar with camps and trips, with this thing and that thing. An effort that started many months ago for a lot of you.

A full calendar points to the idol of busyness, an idol that rewards us for being productive, an idol that says a full calendar means we are important. But a full calendar is not the same as a faithful one.

While all three temptations point in different directions, they are all evidence that we have a hard time staying present. The disciples are being asked to do a hard thing. Not to look up, not to look back, not to look ahead, but to remain. To stand still between second and third and wait. And that is hard for us, too.

But here's the good news. The gospel gives us permission to stand still and trust that our peace isn't found back there or up there or up yonder but here. Now.

In this empty space, the gospel makes a place for us to live in the present. Not in the past, not in the future, but in the now.

The disciples are stuck in the past because the failure, betrayal, and shame of Good Friday still have a hold on them. Yet the cross deals with that. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Likewise, our past is forgiven. It no longer has the ultimate claim on our identity. Our lives are hid with God in Christ.

The disciples want to hurry ahead because they want to know the answer now. The uncertainty is frightening. Fear, however, is a terrible decision maker. But they have nothing left to fear. Death has been defeated.

While we are not given the schedule of future events, we have been given the ending. We don't know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future.

So if the past is forgiven. And if the future is secured. Then you can stand confidently in the present moment. You can stand still in the space between here and there and find peace. This is the power of forgiveness and the hope of resurrection.

You don't have to find a monastery to wait. Notice where Jesus tells his disciples to wait. He doesn't send them off to a Galilean beach house to lay low until the coast is clear.

He sends them back to Jerusalem, to the same city where Jesus was sentenced to die. He sends them right back into the thick of it, and he says, wait here.

This waiting is a gift because they have ten days to stop running the agenda and remember whose agenda it was all along.

I once heard rest described as the soul catching up to the body. That is what summer can be. Not just for you, but for the soul of this whole parish, catching up to everything we have gone through this year.

Waiting is not the same as doing nothing. Luke tells us what they do with those ten days. They go back to Jerusalem. They gather in the Temple and devote themselves to prayer. That is what waiting looked like for them.

For us, we know Jesus is the New Temple, the New Jerusalem. We wait with him in spirit and in truth, wherever we are this summer. Here in Vestavia Hills, or at the lake, on the road, at the beach, or on a baseball field.

So, friends, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? The One you are looking for has not abandoned you. He is sending his presence through the power of the Holy Spirit. In the meantime, remain here.

When you look at all that blank space on your calendar this summer, don't see it as empty. See it as space to encounter God in unexpected ways, in unexpected places.

And remember, you are given permission to wait. Your past is forgiven. Your future is secure. The Spirit is coming. And the blessing Jesus spoke on that hillside now rests on you. Amen.