

Free to Stop Holding the World Together

Acts 1:6–14; Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35; 1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11; John 17:1–11
May 17, 2026

Introduction

The readings for May 17, 2026, place the church in a holy in-between space: the risen Jesus has ascended, Pentecost is coming, and the disciples are learning how to live without controlling what only the Father holds.

That setting matters because the disciples are not standing in a calm world. They are living after trauma, after crucifixion, after resurrection, and before the full outpouring of Pentecost. They have seen enough to believe, but not enough to control. They have received the risen Jesus, but they do not possess the future.

So their question in Acts feels deeply human: “*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6, NIV).

Beneath that question is a longing we understand. Is this the moment when everything finally makes sense? Is this the moment when the struggle ends? Is this the moment when God gives us the map?

Jesus does not shame the question, but he does refuse the control behind it. “*It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority*” (Acts 1:7, NIV).

That is not a cold rebuke. It is a merciful boundary. Some things belong to the Father. Some things are not given to the disciples to manage, calculate, or possess. The disciples are not being abandoned; they are being freed. They are being released from the burden of knowing what only God can know.

That may be one of the most liberating truths many people have never considered:

You are not required to hold the world together.

Most of us carry an invisible worldview that tells us the opposite. We may not say it out loud, but we live as if peace depends on control. We believe that if we can gather enough information, anticipate enough outcomes, prevent enough pain, fix enough people, and manage enough details, then perhaps life will finally feel safe.

This worldview sounds responsible, but it becomes a form of bondage. It turns prayer into worry with religious language. It turns love into overfunctioning. It turns leadership into anxious management. It turns holiness into exhaustion.

The gospel offers another world. So here is the lens for these readings: The Ascension does not mean Jesus left us to manage the world; it means Jesus reigns, intercedes, and frees us from the lie that everything depends on us.

Main Point

In Acts 1, Jesus does not give the disciples control of the kingdom's timetable. He gives them the promise of the Holy Spirit and the vocation of witness. They are not told to solve history. They are told to wait, pray, receive power, and bear witness.

The freedom of the church begins here: we are not free because we know everything; we are free because the risen Jesus sends us by the Spirit into a world already held by the Father.

Psalm 68 deepens that freedom. The psalm does not present God as a distant ruler who has left the vulnerable to fend for themselves. God is the defender of the weak, the protector of the exposed, the giver of home to the lonely, and the deliverer of the imprisoned. "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling" (Psalm 68:5, NIV).

That is holiness with tenderness in it. God's holiness is not fragile distance; it is sovereign mercy. God's holiness makes room for the lonely, lifts the burdened, and gives strength to the weary. So the question changes.

- The anxious worldview asks, "How can I keep everything from falling apart?"
- The gospel asks, "What would it mean to live as one already held by God?"

That is exactly the kind of life the first disciples are learning to receive, and it is also where Friends' theology gives us a beautiful angle of vision. Paul N. Anderson argues that early Friends were not primarily trying to establish another religious sect but were seeking the recovery of "Basic Christianity" or "Primitive Christianity Revived," becoming "Friends of Jesus" because they knew and sought to do his will.^[2]

That matters for this Sunday because the disciples in Acts are not organizing around institutional control. They are gathered in prayerful obedience. They are waiting for power that cannot be manufactured. They are becoming a holy people whose witness flows from presence before it becomes program.

Anderson's "theology of presence" also helps us read these texts well. He writes that God's blessing begins and ends with a new relationship: God offers his presence, and from that reality true blessing flows.^[3]

That is exactly the movement of these readings. The disciples want a schedule; Jesus gives presence. The psalmist sings of a God who dwells among and strengthens his people. Peter tells suffering believers to cast anxiety upon God because God cares for them. John 17 shows Jesus praying his people into the Father's keeping.

The Christian life, then, is not a technique for controlling outcomes. It is communion with the living God.

This is also where Bowen Family Systems Theory helps name what many people feel but do not know how to describe. Anxious systems train people to react, overfunction, fuse, blame, and manage one another. In Alastair Roberts's summary of Edwin Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve*, Friedman's concern is that chronically anxious societies become reactive, unimaginative, and overly dependent on technique, data, and quick fixes rather than mature, well-differentiated presence.^[4]

In a church, family, or community, anxiety often whispers, “Do something now. Fix this now. Make them understand. Get everyone calm. Take responsibility for what belongs to someone else.”

But Jesus forms a different kind of people.

- Not passive people. Not detached people. Not careless people.
- Holy people. Steady people. Prayerful people. People who know the difference between faithfulness and control.

This is why 1 Peter speaks so powerfully. Peter does not pretend that suffering is strange. He does not tell believers that faith will exempt them from hardship. Instead, he teaches them how to remain holy and steady within it. “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7, NIV).

That sentence is not sentimental. It is spiritual warfare against the false self that believes everything depends on me. Anxiety is not merely a feeling to be managed; it is often a misplaced burden to be surrendered.

Peter’s command to be alert and sober-minded is not a call to panic. It is a call to holy clarity. The believer is not asked to float through suffering in denial. The believer is invited to stand firm, resist evil, and trust that God will restore, strengthen, and establish his people.

This is not the freedom of escape. It is the freedom of faithful presence.

John 17 brings the whole essay to its center. Jesus prays for his people. Before they are sent, they are prayed over. Before they understand their mission, they are held in the Son’s communion with the Father.

Jesus defines eternal life not as mere duration, but as knowing God: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3, NIV).

Eternal life begins as holy relationship. It is not simply life after death. It is life in communion with the Father through the Son, by the Spirit, beginning now and reaching toward fullness.

Robert Barclay’s catechetical use of John 17:3 helps underline this point. When Barclay asks where the height of happiness is found, his answer turns directly to Christ’s words: eternal life is knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent.^[5]

That makes John 17 more than a doctrinal statement. It becomes the heart of Christian freedom. We are not saved into vague religious effort. We are saved into communion.

N. T. Wright’s account of Christian hope fits this movement well. In *Surprised by Hope*, Wright insists that Christian hope is not merely about life after death but about God’s future becoming present in the church’s life and mission.^[6] Resurrection hope does not remove us from the world. Hope sends us back into the world as people who no longer need to be ruled by the world’s fear.

In another place, Wright describes the resurrection as the beginning of God’s worldwide mission and the new creation, not simply a private hope that believers go to heaven when they die.^[7]

Conclusion

That is the liberty of the gospel in these texts:

- We are free to stop holding the world together because the Father already holds the times and seasons.
- We are free to stop carrying every anxiety because God cares for us.
- We are free to stop confusing control with love because Jesus prays for his people.
- We are free to stop treating suffering as proof of abandonment because the God of all grace restores, strengthens, and establishes.
- We are free to stop performing holiness as religious pressure because holiness is life formed in the presence of God.

This freedom does not make us lazy. It makes us faithful.

The disciples still return to Jerusalem. They still gather. They still pray. They still wait. They still witness. But they do not carry the kingdom as if it depends on their anxious competence. They receive the kingdom as people who belong to the reign of Christ.

That is a wonderful word for the church right now. We do not have to know everything before we can be faithful. We do not have to fix everything before we can pray. We do not have to carry everyone before we can love them well. The future is not finally resting in our hands, and that is not bad news.

It is mercy.

Jesus Christ is risen. Jesus Christ reigns. Jesus Christ prays for his people. The Spirit is promised. The Father holds the times and seasons.

Because of that, we are free—not free from responsibility, but free from false responsibility; not free from obedience, but free for obedience; not free from holiness, but free into holiness.

That may be the gift of these readings: the world says, “Hold it together,” but the gospel says, “You are held.”

And when the church begins to believe that, even a little, something beautiful happens. Anxiety loses its throne. Control loosens its grip. Prayer becomes possible again. Witness becomes joyful again. Holiness becomes less like a burden and more like a life received.

That is good news for tired people. It is good news for anxious families. It is good news for churches trying to be faithful in a world they cannot control.

You are free to stop holding the world together.

Jesus already is.

Back Matter / Notes

[1] Revised Common Lectionary, “Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A, May 17, 2026,” Vanderbilt Divinity Library, accessed May 10, 2026. The listed readings are Acts 1:6–14; Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35; 1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11; and John 17:1–11.

[2] Paul N. Anderson, “Primitive Christianity Revived—The Original Quaker Vision,” *Quaker Religious Thought* 131 (2018): 5–6. Anderson argues that the first generations of Friends sought to recover “Basic Christianity” or “Primitive Christianity Revived,” becoming “Friends of Jesus” in light of John 15:14–15.

[3] Paul N. Anderson, “A Theology of Presence,” *Evangelical Friend* 26, no. 6 (July/August 1993): 4. Anderson emphasizes that God’s blessing begins and ends with relationship: God offers his presence, and from that reality true blessing flows.

[4] Alastair J. Roberts, *Self and Leadership: A Summary of and Engagement with Edwin Friedman’s A Failure of Nerve* (2016), 4–16. Roberts summarizes Friedman’s concern that chronically anxious societies become reactive, technique-dependent, and resistant to mature, differentiated leadership.

[5] Robert Barclay, *A Catechism and Confession of Faith* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1837), chap. 1. Barclay begins his catechism by asking where true happiness and eternal life are found, answering with John 17:3.

[6] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), preface. Wright frames Christian hope around both the ultimate future promised in the gospel and the discovery of hope within the present world.

[7] Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 238–39. Wright connects Jesus’ resurrection with new creation, worldwide mission, and the Spirit-empowered sending of Jesus’ followers.