

Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem. Passover is a few days away. And Jesus will soon be crucified. All too soon the disciples will be without their teacher, their leader. What will they do then?

For it is as if Jesus, preparing to go on a journey to the cross, summoned his disciples and entrusted to them his ministry of proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus had first called Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, as well as James and John (sons of Zebedee), to follow him and fish for people. Now that his time with them is drawing short, Jesus might have expected more of these first four disciples – or perhaps they themselves would have felt a greater responsibility to carry on Jesus’ ministry than the other disciples. Their core group of twelve disciples included: Philip; Bartholomew; Matthew; Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus; Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot; and Judas Iscariot. These disciples had a range of abilities for carrying on Jesus’ ministry. However, one of them, Judas, had already been stealing from their common fund and would soon seek to financially profit from betraying Jesus to the chief priests who were conspiring to arrest and kill him. The twelve would become eleven.

In the fifty some days – roughly from Passover to the day of Pentecost – the remaining disciples would: witness Judas’ betrayal, Jesus’ arrest and sentencing and crucifixion; discover that Jesus’ body had been resurrected; see and speak with the risen Jesus; learn of Judas’ death by suicide; watch Jesus ascend into the heavens; await the coming of the Holy Spirit; and add Matthias to the core group of disciples to bring their number back to twelve. And when the day of Pentecost arrived the Holy Spirit came upon the twelve while they were in Jerusalem. At the sound of a mighty wind, and with these twelve Galilean men speaking different languages, a crowd gathered, and Peter got up to address the crowd. He called upon them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that their sins could be forgiven, and they could also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. On that day about three thousand people were baptized. And from thereon, day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2)

Jesus had invested so much into preparing his disciples to carry on his ministry. He had taught them by word and example how to love and serve one another, how to pray, how to meet people and offer them the power of God’s forgiveness and healing. Jesus showed an immeasurable trust in his disciples’ ability to pick up and carry on this ministry. Clearly his trust was not misplaced. Within just a few short months after his death and resurrection, Jesus’ disciples had already welcomed an astounding number of new believers. And that number just continued to grow.

Even in the midst of such phenomenal growth, I'm sure the disciples still keenly missed Jesus and looked forward to the day of his promised return. They had so much to tell Jesus about! They expected Jesus to return in glory soon, right? Surely it would be some time during their own lifetimes. But they **didn't know exactly when** Jesus would return. And as time went by they had to learn to balance this waiting in anticipation for Jesus' return, with continuing to be faithful disciples of Jesus every day until then. They also had to do some theological sorting out of things they had not anticipated having to deal with. For example: what would happen to any believers who died before their Lord's return? Would the deceased miss out on experiencing the day of the Lord – or not? They prayerfully determined that those who had died in Christ would rise first at his return. And then the living would join them in Christ's glory. But until the day of the Lord arrived, all of the disciples would need to stay focused on keeping the faith, sharing Christ's love, and spreading the good news of salvation through their Lord Jesus Christ. They couldn't let their guard down and be tricked into believing the claim that the Roman Empire could provide them with peace and security. Because empires rise and fall, only God can be counted on to provide true peace and eternal security. And it would be up to the community of believers to encourage one another to hold on to the promise of the complete peace and security to come in God's kingdom. And to continue to hold on and encourage each other as the years rolled by and they still did not see Jesus' return.

We might want to ask ourselves: If it was so hard for that first generation of disciples to stay focused on the promised fulfillment of God's kingdom coming with Jesus' return, while they kept navigating their day-to-day life in the stratified social and economic structure of the Roman Empire – how much more difficult is it for us today? Here we are, two thousand years later, and we're still waiting for the day of the Lord to arrive. But the sheer number of distractions and temptations that surround and lure us to lose our focus on living a disciplined life of faith – why, that seems to grow exponentially each day! We're constantly dealing with stuff the first disciples never imagined! They lived in a world where oil lamps, fires, stars, or the moon were the only things that could provide light at night. We can live 24-7 in artificial light and we can easily find ourselves anticipating the next wave of AI (artificial intelligence) powered electronics more than we're anticipating Jesus' return. The first disciples typically walked or took a boat to get anywhere. But how many times have we considered what it will be like to have driverless cars and trucks on the road, versus the number of times we've considered what it will be like to have Jesus return? The first disciples communicated by speaking face to face or by writing letters. We have phones, Facetime, texting, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube videos, email – etc., etc., etc. How quickly the darkness of distraction can fall upon us.

These days it takes both personal vigilance and collective encouragement for us to stay focused on being faithful disciples of Jesus each and every day. It takes a great deal of diligence for us to be children of light. We also need to risk going against the grain of what everybody else seems to be doing. To be sober and patient in a world that is drunk

on instant gratification and short-term fixes. To live with anticipation of the best that is yet to be when the day of the Lord arrives. But this is the work that Jesus has entrusted to us. Jesus has given each of us the time and space to work out how to carry on his ministry right where we're at today. May we carry on this work, this ministry, this way of living, to the best of our abilities so that we can be invited by Jesus to enter into the joy of God's kingdom forevermore.

Amen.