Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!) Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ. This past Thursday was the feast of the Ascension on the church’s calendar. It’s traditionally considered one of the six major festivals of church year, but it doesn’t get the attention any more that it used to. Before the pandemic hit us in March, the three local ELCA congregations were talking about the possibility of holding a joint Ascension service. We hadn’t made any concrete plans, but were moving in that direction. Maybe next year. These days even many Roman Catholic dioceses have transferred the celebration of the Ascension to the following Sunday. And the latest revision of the lectionary includes an Ascension reading for this Sunday, probably because they realized that many churches would not have a service on the actual day.

I’m going to focus on that Ascension reading in my sermon this morning, partly because, like our lectionary compilers, I don’t want us to entirely miss the Ascension, but also because I was struck in reading this text this week just how relevant it is to our current situation. I have been amazed, actually, over the past two months of adapting to this coronavirus pandemic just how relevant our texts have been. Maybe that’s because we happened to hit the richest part of the entire lectionary, with those life-and-death readings of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. But I think those texts never seem more relevant that when we’re facing an honest-to-goodness life-and-death situation, and doing so all together. Normally our life-and-death situations are more personal; a loved one dies, or we face a serious medical diagnosis, or the loss of a job, or a crisis in a relationship. If we have close friends or a trusted faith community we might unburden ourselves on them. But much of the time we face such events on our own, either because we don’t want to bother other people with them, or we are embarrassed by them, or because the people we turn to don’t really want to deal with such unpleasantness until they are forced to.

But now in the middle of a pandemic, the dynamic is different. We are all together in this in facing the real possibility that any one of us could get sick with this disease and maybe even die. And even if we are spared that outcome, there seem to be other side-effects for some people that will be with them for the rest of their lives. Maybe it’s these glaring realities that are making the biblical texts of our lectionary jump out at me these days. And maybe you’re having that experience too?

At any rate, what’s jumping out at me this week, as now all of our states are taking some measures to reopen businesses and even places of worship – against the advice of epidemiologists, is Jesus’ instructions to the disciples as he is about to leave them. He doesn’t say, “OK, I’m going now, so you all need to get busy and continue my work.” Maybe the end of Matthew’s Gospel leans a little in that direction, but here in Acts, as well as in its prequel, the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus tells them instead to wait. Don’t leave Jerusalem. Shelter in place and wait for God’s promised help.

I’m not sure that I’ve ever really paid that much attention to this part of the text, or how counter-cultural it is, at least to our culture. Our whole way of life in the modern world is built on not having to wait for anything. How many items that you regularly shop for online can you get delivered the next day? If you order a book online, because you’re one of those people who likes to have a physical copy of a book, in many cases you can have immediate access to an electronic version so you don’t have to wait to start reading it. It’s the same with CDs, if anyone still orders CDs. Fast food has become a staple of life in the past 50 years. It’s even faster with
“drive-thru” windows. And at home we have microwaves! Our microwave oven at home stopped working recently. Fortunately it was just before the warranty ran out, so I was able to have it sent in to be repaired. We lived without a microwave for more than a month. Did you know that it’s possible to live without a microwave for more than a month? Did you know that you can reheat leftovers in a regular oven? Instead of 30 seconds it takes about 10 minutes to preheat the oven and then heat up a slice of leftover pizza. Ten minutes! An eternity. But you know what? The result is much nicer. And don’t get me started on how much better frozen soft pretzels are in a conventional oven than in a microwave. It’s quite a revelation. It just takes forever. You know, ten minutes. I think you take my point, and I’m sure you can come up with better examples than mine about our expectations for instant gratification.

Jesus doesn’t give the disciples instant gratification, though, even though that is clearly what they want. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They don’t want to wait. They want it now. And Jesus responds, “It is not for you to know.” “I’m giving you a promise to empower your witness and your service in the world. You don’t get to manage this. You don’t get to plan it out. Your task now is to wait.”

What’s that about? Why should they wait? What does waiting do for them? Even those questions are very modern. There must be a purpose. This must be a strategy to increase their productivity in the long run, right? I suppose if we have to think of it in that way there is something to that. So what do the disciples do? They go back to their upper room, back to their social distancing, and they wait. And while they wait, they devote themselves to prayer. That’s it. Waiting and prayer. That is their task in this in-between time.

Our text doesn’t go into the reasons for this waiting of the disciples – why it’s important, or what it does for them. But it seems to me that there is a connection between their waiting and the promise that is attached to their waiting. The promise is that God will give them what they need for the mission that they will be sent out into the world to do. The waiting and the praying help them to focus on that promise. They free them from all other distractions to wait with expectation for what God promises to give them. Because when they eventually do go out into the world as agents of God’s life-giving gospel, they will do so by faith alone, faith that trusts in the promise that they now focus on, faith that is itself a gift of the promised Holy Spirit.

Not all of us have the luxury of waiting now. Some of us are essential workers. Some of us are designated shoppers. But many of us, most of us in this congregation, are able to wait in this in-between time of the global epidemic. For most of us, this is how we now can serve others by limiting as much as possible the spread of the virus. And as we undertake that service, we also have the opportunity to focus, as the disciples did, on the promise of God to be with us and to empower us for our vocations, our calling, both right now, and in the months and years to come as we emerge from this crisis. May God in these days give us the patience, the compassion, and the determination to wait with expectation for the fulfillment of God’s promises. And as we wait, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the risen Christ Jesus. Amen.