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Acts 1:6-14

Companions on the Journey

We are in the last week of the season of Easter - the season between Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost. The Sunday before Pentecost we mark the ascension of the Lord, an event that occurred 40 days after the discovery of the empty tomb. This would actually put it last Thursday. Since it is not our tradition to come to services on Thursday, we celebrate it on the Sunday after – today.

Ascension Sunday marks Jesus' last appearance to the disciples. It marks the transition of the mission of God being fulfilled by Jesus Christ the man to the mission of God being fulfilled by the church - the church being Christ's body here on earth after Jesus is no longer physically present. The ascension of the Lord is when we get our marching orders as a collective and the promise that we will be able to fulfill God's mission through the power of the Holy Spirit – a gift we acknowledge next week at Pentecost. Hear now these words from the book of Acts, chapter 1:

So when they – that is the disciples- had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “People 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.”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying: Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

You may have seen the video online or in the news in the last two weeks of the ordination ceremony of the newest monk in the largest Buddhist sect in South Korea, the Jogye Order. The New York Times¹ describes the ordination this way:

Gabi led a procession of chanting Buddhist monks into a temple in Seoul. Wearing a ceremonial gray and brown robe, black shoes, a rosary and flesh-colored gloves, Gabi brought hands to prayer.

“Will you devote yourself to the holy Buddha?” one of the monks asked.

“Yes, I will devote myself,” Gabi replied.

“Will you devote yourself to the holy teaching?” the monk asked.

“Yes, I will devote myself,” Gabi answered.

If these answers sound robotic, that’s because Gabi is, in fact, a robot. On May 6, Gabi became the first robot to be ordained as a monk in South Korea by the Jogye Order. The name Gabi means Buddha’s mercy.

The video of the ordination is pretty striking. Gabi is a bit shorter than the other monks and his/her/their hands are a bit large for their frame. Yet when asked to put their palms together and reply to the ordination questions, Gabi does so, and replies with an incredibly humanoid voice. “Yes, I will **devote** myself,” Gabi replied.

And Luke, the author of the book of Acts, tells us that the disciples together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as Jesus’ brothers were constantly **devoting** themselves to prayer.

The Greek word that is translated as “devoted” in this passage from Acts can also be translated as “persevere” and means to do something with intense effort, possibly despite difficulty and to be constantly diligent. In my mind’s eye, I can picture the eleven named disciples, the unnamed women, and Jesus’ mother Mary and brothers in the upper room. They are still worried about the authorities finding them and potentially arresting them. They are puzzling over Jesus’ appearances after the resurrection and his now disappearance out of their sight. And they are wondering just what Jesus’ final words: “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” really means for their lives. So yes, to prepare for the days ahead, to say that intense effort and perseverance, devotion, will be needed, is an understatement.

The disciples model what human devotion looks like. And what about Gabi, our humanoid robotic Buddhist monk? What does it look like for it to fulfill its vow to devote itself to the teachings of the holy Buddha? I suppose that there may be an intensity to the programming

¹ Remy Tumin and John Yoon. Meditating or Rebooting? A Robot Buddhist Monk Comes to South Korea. *New York Times*, May 6, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/06/technology/robot-monk-buddhist-seoul.html>; See also <https://apnews.com/video/south-korean-buddhist-sect-welcomes-humanoid-robot-cc0932ae27b446a78324255136fa0b6c>

that will be necessary for Gabi's work as a monk. Maybe some WD-40 inspired perseverance in keeping all of its parts moving freely and battery recharging when the days get long. Is this what devotion looks like in the 21st century vs. the first century? I think there is a bit more to the story.

I want to pause for a minute and ask you to think about what image comes to mind for you when you think about the ascension from the scripture I shared a bit ago. Turn to a neighbor and share what the image is.

I won't ask for a show of hands, but I am guessing for some of you there was some sort of image of Jesus floating up to heaven, with puffy white clouds in the background. If you Google "ascension of Jesus", you will see a lot of these type of images, with Jesus in long white robes, blond hair gently flowing as he glides upward. Sometimes Jesus is wearing a red sash over his robe. But Jesus is always glowing. The pictures are often similar in style and substance to those of the Transfiguration. Remember the Transfiguration – way back in the beginning of March, the Sunday before we began our Lenten journey to cross.

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.

Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory. After Peter, James, and John had discussed building tents for Jesus, Elijah and Moses, a cloud overshadowed them and a voice said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.

While images of the Transfiguration of Jesus and the Ascension of Jesus often have a similar look – the glowing Jesus sitting in the clouds - there is one significant and notable difference in the images - the cast of characters. In the story of the Transfiguration, Jesus is accompanied by just three disciples, Peter, John and James. And at the Ascension all of the remaining eleven disciples are named. "When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying: Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They are joined by some women including Jesus' mother, as well as Jesus' brothers. They are each other's companions on the journey."

You see Jesus' final instructions were a bit daunting... "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." These disciples, this assortment of folks who included fisherman and a tax collector, a carpenter, and a Zealot (now that will get some attention on your Linked In profile) had done some traveling around the Galilee region and to Jerusalem, but they were not by any measure cosmopolitan. Sure they might be hold their own in Jerusalem and the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria, but the ends of the earth? No way. Jesus knew that this would be a challenge so he gave them a gift. Actually two gifts. The first is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the comforter and

advocate, God's tangible presence with them always. And Jesus gave them the gift of each other – of companions on the journey.

Jesus knew that to go to the ends of the earth as his witness was going to mean engaging with people with different backgrounds, different languages, different food preferences, different politics and different faith traditions. Talking with strangers is hard work. It was then and it is today. Work we sometimes avoid as it becomes easier and easier to go through our days without conversing with people outside our little bubble.

In a recent article, New York Times columnist Melissa Kirsch wrote about talking to strangers as part of our public offering. She says, "It has become very easy to avoid talking to strangers. Noise-canceling headphones, internet shopping, self-checkout lines and, when all else fails, our phones — taken out at a bar, a party, a concert — insulate us against humanity's intrusion. ... But when not interacting becomes the default, our social muscles atrophy."² She goes on to quote an article by author David Sax, from which our words of preparation in the bulletin are taken. Sax reminds us that "If we engaged only with the people we knew, our world would be small. That leap of faith toward the unknown other is what allows us to grow beyond the family unit, tribe or nation."³ That is what Jesus called the disciples to do. To move beyond their family, tribe and nation. That is what Jesus calls us to do. And just like on the day of ascension, Jesus calls us to do this as a community.

This morning we celebrate our recent, or soon to be, graduates from high school and college. These graduates will be moving beyond their family and close knit community. They will be talking to strangers, strangers who may become companions on their journeys. Or maybe not. Maybe strangers who just happen to be in the same place as them for a brief moment, and they connect on a human to human level. At the end of the day, sometimes that is what we need. To make a connection.

Jesus gave us all companions on the journey. Some of these companions are sitting beside you Sunday morning. And some you have not yet met. With the gift and the power of the Holy Spirit we can be transformative in this world.

Jesus didn't choose just one disciple to bear his message to the world, to be his body, the church. He left his instructions to all of his disciples, those present that day and those not on the Mount of Olivet. Jesus didn't send them out alone. He sent them out together. As he does for us. Join me in prayer.

² Melissa Kirsch. Public Offering. New York Times, May 2, 2026
<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/02/briefing/public-offering.html>

³ David Sax, *Why Strangers Are Good for Us*. New York Times, June 12, 2022
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/12/opinion/strangers-talking-benefits.html>