The resurrection of Jesus changed everything. The disciples' mission was on again. The opening question of the Acts text makes perfect sense. The disciples ask Jesus: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus answers them: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (v. 8). In this, Jesus echoed the sentiments of the prophets before him. The people of Israel tended to be a bit too myopic. They forgot that Abram's blessing was to go to *all people*. They forgot that the temple was for *all nations*. While they felt passionate about being God's people in God's land, they all too often neglected God's mission and justice to *all the world*. Knowing this, Jesus’ last words to the disciples are crystal clear: advance the gospel to the ends of the earth!

But, as soon as he says this, Jesus disappears. The disciples stood there, craning their necks toward the sky, until angels appeared to refocus their gaze. Jesus will come back, they said. Stop staring! There is work to be done. The work of spreading Jesus’ Gospel of love and justice, compassion and grace is left to the most unlikely lot of people you could imagine. The disciples grew up cleaning fish and collecting taxes. They were not religious leaders or government officials. They did not have power or position. They often misunderstood Jesus’ teachings and parables. They fought over who was the greatest among them. They fell asleep in the garden. They denied Jesus in his last days. They only *fully* understood the life and mission of Jesus during the last 40 days after his resurrection, when he "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Humanly speaking, these men might not be the best ones to advance God’s new kingdom.

But the ascension was a powerful event, the hinge on which their apostolic mission pivoted. Between the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, is the ascension, which convinced the disciples that Jesus' mission was now their mission. Jesus is gone, and they are the ones to carry on what he began. The ascension was counterintuitive in that even as it appears that Jesus deserted his disciples, for the first time, they took ownership of his mission for themselves. Far from feeling abandoned, they felt empowered. Jesus’ mission was theirs to advance.

Ascension Sunday is a good time for us to reflect on how *we* partner with Jesus in life and faith. Do we have a clear sense of a personal mission? Do we feel empowered? How do we advance the gospel at church or at home or at work? As we ponder these questions, let me propose four implications this text offers for Christian living.

**It's on us.** Dr. Hawking, who was almost completely paralyzed, could justifiably say his physical limitations were too great to overcome. Likewise, the disciples had plenty of reasons to avoid the mission. Like them, we make excuses for why we cannot answer the call to serve. Perhaps it's, "I haven't been a Christian long enough," or "I'm not trained or haven't been to seminary," or "Someone might ask a question I can't answer" or "I don't have enough time because of work, or family, or the fill-in-the-blank." But then, like now, using imperfect people is God's primary plan for sharing the gospel. If we do not share the good news, who will? It is up to each one of us to share what we know to be true to whomever we can, as best we can.

**We are not alone.** Jesus told the disciples they would have help. He told them to go to Jerusalem and wait for help to arrive. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit of God filled the disciples with great power for their mission. As post-Pentecost Christians, we receive the same Spirit the disciples received. That means our limitations, like theirs, need not stand in the way of Christ’s mission. Augustine of Hippo put it this way: “Jesus departed from our sight that he might return to our hearts. He departed, and behold, he is here.” Jesus rose and the Spirit descended: we are never alone in this work.

**We are in a partnership.** Paul did not go preaching with persuasive words alone but with a demonstration of the power of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:4). We are no different in our gifts and passions. When we understand our mission as a *partnership* with God's Spirit, we are encouraged and empowered to do the work Jesus calls us to do. Each of us receives some gift of the Spirit to do the work that only we can do to further God’s promised reign on earth. God is active in the world, out ahead of us. The questions we need to ask are: Where do we see God working, and how can we join God there?

**The time is now.** The angels issued a clear warning: Jesus is coming back the same way he left. After 2,000 years, it is easy not to take that seriously. Christ's return can feel like hitting the lotto: chances are it will not happen in my lifetime. But James reminds us that our life is like a mist that comes and then vanishes. He says, we know the good we ought to do and if we do not do it, we sin (4:13-17). So, for what exactly are we waiting?

The *whole* world needs the good news of the Gospel. Jesus would not let the disciples be content with Israel alone. He sent them out to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Too much sky-staring Christianity accomplishes nothing. Maybe this is what soured Dr. Hawking. Comparing the impacts of science and religion, he said, "There is a fundamental difference between religion, which is based on authority [and] science, which is based on observation and reason. Science will win because it works." Dr. Hawking saw science advancing us to the point where we can abandon this place for new planets.

But what if Dr. Hawking saw the Gospel in action? What if he saw faith that made an impact? What if he saw faith that transformed and changed lives? What if he saw a faith that addressed the world's urgent needs and problems? What if he saw a faith that made abandoning earth an unnecessary idea? A faith that *works* is the kind of Christianity to which the ascension calls us. And while we can serve God in many ways, we *cannot* do it by simply staring at the sky. Ascension Day is a natural time to look at our spheres of influence and ask, "Am I *abandoning* or *advancing* my calling?" If we trust God’s promise of a new heaven and new earth, we will get to work here and now to help make it happen. If we believe what we pray for, that God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven, then we will partner with God using our time to achieve it.

Although it may appear that Jesus abandons earth at his ascension, nothing could be further from the truth. He leaves the earth not to escape it but to rule over it. Eastern Orthodox Christians capture this spiritual reality in their paintings and mosaics of "Christ Pantocrator" (Greek, "all-powerful"). Christ Pantocrator typically inhabits the domed ceiling of a church. From there, he looks down on the earth, one hand typically raised in blessing. Orthodox Christians know we are not alone in this world. Christ is enthroned in highest heaven, observing all that takes place among God's children on earth. We are not abandoned: we are advancing the Gospel of Jesus, one step at a time, one heart at a time, one life at a time.

Prayer: God of all nations, break down the barriers which divide us, and which blunt the wonderful message of your grace. Pour out your Spirit upon us and convict us of our prejudice and selfishness and replace it with your transcending love. Forgive us, forgive me, when my own shortsightedness and selfishness interferes with the world seeing a united Church proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Savior. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

**Sources:**

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**Not Abandon, but Advancing**

Sunday, May 21, 2023 [Acts 1:6-14](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+1%3a6-14&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Stephen Hawking was an English theoretical physicist, cosmologist, and author who, at the time of his death in 2018, was director of research at the Centre for Theoretical Cosmology at the University of Cambridge. Dr. Hawking wrote many books, including the international best-selling *A Brief History of Time*. From human space flight to alien life to theoretical physics, Dr. Hawking tapped out some of the modern world’s most mind-blowing ideas. Whenever the boundaries of human potential are discussed, a sound bite from Dr. Hawking is sure to get thrown into the conversation.

Dr. Hawking’s ideas generated heated discussions, but none more so than when he suggested that humankind must *abandon earth or face extinction*. "It will be difficult enough to avoid disaster on planet Earth in the next hundred years, let alone the next thousand, or million. The human race shouldn't have all its eggs in one basket, or on one planet." Dr. Hawking said that we need to get out of here, find a new planet to colonize, and start from scratch without the mess we've made here. Many people think Dr. Hawking is right.

Some Christians might even agree with Dr. Hawking in the sense that the earth is a mess, and we are waiting to punch our ticket to heaven and move on to God’s "new creation." The new heaven described in Revelation is expected to be a better place, without the human mess! But theologian N.T. Wright counters that thinking, saying, "Never at any point do the gospels or Paul say Jesus has been raised, therefore we are all going to heaven. They all say, Jesus is raised, therefore the new creation has begun, and we have a job to do." With due respect to Dr. Hawking, I think Jesus would say that we are NOT to *abandon* this world, but rather we are to *advance* the Gospel for the transformation of this world.

On Ascension Day, the disciples watch as Jesus seemingly does what Dr. Hawking suggests: He rises into the heavens, disappearing from their view, in an exit that would make a magician envious. It appears as if Jesus *abandons* the earth and leaves his disciples behind. But this is not what really happened. Jesus did not abandon earth or his disciples or us. For the disciples, the ascension was a powerful catalyst to get them back to work on the mission Jesus left them. The days prior to Jesus' murder were brutal. They scattered and hid, fearing for their lives. Imagine their confusion and despair. Were their last three years a big mistake? What would they do now? Go back to fishing or collecting taxes?