



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

UNLEASHED, PART I

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Federal Way, WA
March 30th, 2008*

New York Magazine ran an article on all the celebrities that now live in New York. Apparently, you can regularly catch sight of them on the street. Along with the article, the magazine included a map of “where to see famous people and pretend you didn’t.” They had exact locations of where you could find Katie Couric or Bono or even Joe Namath. They were also so kind as to include locations where celebrities who are now dead used to hang out. So now you can hobnob with the stars and be in the know. Next time you go to New York, just tell me and I’ll hook you up with a copy.

But seeing a map of where the stars hang out got me thinking: I’m sure many of you have been wondering where all the pastors hang out. Where are you most likely to bump into a preacher? What’s their favorite spot? And what about the dead ones? I did extensive research and created my own map, and I can tell you that your best bet is to hang around the book of Acts. Eventually, all preachers show up there again.

The pastor we had in California came back to Acts again and again when we lived there, and when we went to hear him speak at his new church in Canada, guess what his text was? Acts 2. He’s now at a church in Missouri and I saw on line that he’s preached on that book there as well.

We’re starting a new series today, and it’s going to be based out of the book of Acts. This is a first for me, because this is the first book of the Bible I’ve returned to for a series since starting New Day. I have not repeated any sections until now. When we were meeting as a core group, Acts was what we used for our initial study. I got kind of nostalgic pulling out my old notes with all the overhead transparencies in it. Hopefully this won’t feel too repetitive for the ten or twelve of you who were there at the time.

I just love the book of Acts. The stories in it are big and full of energy. It reads like a novel, with all kinds of drama. But what draws so many preachers back to this particular book so often is the fact that it shows church life just as it is starting out. It highlights all the most important themes of being a church. I wouldn’t say it gives us a blueprint or specific action plan, but it calls us back to the basics. It reminds us why we do what we do.

New Day is in a much different place than we were five and a half years ago. We can't all fit in someone's living room anymore. There are all kinds of new challenges to think through that go along with growth. That's healthy and good. We need to be prepared to adapt as we move forward. The board had an all day retreat yesterday to talk about many of the pressing needs that face us as we step into the future.

But we also need to keep coming back to the center. We need to stay connected to the story we find in Acts, because it's really easy for churches to be successful when it comes to growth but not so successful when it comes to staying on mission.

I've called this series "Unleashed" for a couple of reasons. First, in Acts you see the church unleashed into the world. It's not something that can be contained in one spot. When marbles are spilled out of a bag, they want to roll. They can't help it – that's just what they do. The church was designed to roll, and throughout Acts, we see it scattering like marbles. Sometimes it's by choice as they send people out to new destinations, and sometimes it's because the church was persecuted and forced to scatter. But God intended for his church to be unleashed out into the world.

But it's also the Holy Spirit that is unleashed in the book of Acts. The official name of Acts is "The Acts of the Apostles," but it's been said that it should really be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." He's the driving force behind what happens. This is his book and we see new expressions of the spirit here that demonstrate God's power in amazing ways.

My hope and prayer as we go through this study is that God will use the book of Acts to unleash his Spirit in our lives, and in turn unleash our church into our community and the world.

Luke wrote Acts sometime after he wrote the book that bears his name. We tend to think that Paul wrote most of the New Testament, but when you combine Luke and Acts, you find that Luke takes the award for writing the largest percentage. If you read the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts, you discover that Acts is a sequel. It's volume two. Luke continues the story right where he left off.

He was a careful historian. He was a doctor and a skilled writer, and in the case of Acts, he was also one of the characters in the story. He traveled with Paul, so in many of the adventures he's giving a firsthand account.

Acts and the gospel of Luke were both originally written to an individual named Theophilus. We don't know much about the man, other than what Luke tells us. Apparently, this was somebody much like us – a person who had heard about Jesus second hand and put his faith in him. He needed to know more and wanted information that could back up his new beliefs. So Luke does a very thorough job and seeks to include all the most important material that someone would need to know if they hadn't met Jesus when he was walking the earth.

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus when Jesus is nowhere to be seen? That's what the Christians in the book of Acts are discovering, and the lessons they learn translate right into today.

Acts 1:1-14

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

The forty days immediately following the resurrection had to have been absolutely electric. If Jesus was alive, there was nothing God couldn't do. No doubt the disciples had huge expectations now and anticipated great things. And yet something was up. Jesus was different. He came and went more often. He seemed to have something on his mind.

We're in a political season right now, so I'll use a political analogy. Let's say you've gotten yourself involved in a presidential campaign. In fact, you work at the campaign headquarters, firing up the volunteers, getting the message out. Everybody is high on

your candidate's chances of winning. There's a lot of buzz about him. You're totally committed to the cause. But something strange has been happening. The closer you get to election day, the less and less anyone sees this guy. He's just not around as much. In fact, he doesn't seem particularly interested in the race at all. When he does show up, he's talking about other things. Then, just days before the election, he disappears all together. No sign of him anywhere. Now what are you supposed to do? Where does a campaign go when the candidate goes missing?

That's not an exact parallel to what's going on in Acts, but it's close. The disciples still had in mind that Jesus was going to do something political. They may have even been more convinced of that since the resurrection. But he's talking about leaving and having them carry on the work without him. How could that possibly happen? They'd like to make him a king, which would be a whole lot more difficult without him around. They're still a bit confused about who he is and what's going to happen next.

They're ready for action, so you can picture how the dinner must have gone the night Jesus pulled them all together.

"Thanks for coming, guys. Here's what we're going to do."

"Bring it on! We're ready. Just say the word."

"First off, I'm going to return to my Father."

"Alright. Then what?"

"Then I want all of you to go back to Jerusalem."

"Got it. And then?"

"I want you to wait there."

"Um...okaaay. And then you want us to..."

"Just wait. Wait for the gift from my Father."

Kind of anticlimactic. Wait? Who likes to wait? If Jesus had watched any movies, he would know that nobody listens when you tell them that. "You wait here," is probably the most ignored instruction in any screenplay. Nobody stays where they're supposed to. They sneak off the second they get the chance. Of course that's what gets them in trouble. But still, no one likes to wait. And when there's all this momentum built up by the resurrection, you would think Jesus would want to take advantage of it and send everyone out right away rather than reign them in when their enthusiasm is highest.

But he says "Wait. Stay in Jerusalem and wait."

I find it significant that the very first thing this brand new group called the church is asked to do is wait on God. That's the foundation for everything else that's to come in this book. Waiting precedes everything.

I would suggest that holds just as true for us. Waiting on God is a basic lesson we need to learn over and over again in the Christian life. We have to keep learning it because it tends to go against everything we feel by instinct.

Oh, I have such a hard time waiting. When you think about it, most of the things we associate with that word are negative. It always seems like you have to wait endlessly at the doctor's office, wasting your time. You wait when you get put on hold forever when you'd rather be doing something else. Or you're waiting for that check to arrive in the mail and it just doesn't come. Waiting feels unproductive and frustrating, because it means something you want is delayed.

I'm sure that was the last thing the disciples wanted to hear that day. But there were really only two other options for them if they didn't wait. The first was to **run away**. Jesus had told them to stay in Jerusalem, a pretty scary place for them to be right about then. The same people who had crucified Jesus now believed that the disciples had stolen his body. They want to see this Christ movement crushed.

Peter had already denied knowing Jesus to save his own skin. Other disciples had scattered at the crucifixion. What would keep them together now if he was gone and there was danger all around? Plus, from a purely practical standpoint, they were fishermen from Galilee. How would they finance this extra stay? You know what it's like to have to spend an extra night in a hotel and pay for extra meals. Imagine doing that with no end in sight. That's a big unknown.

So there were good reasons to be afraid, to worry, to run away. Part of them would want nothing more than to get out of that situation. Lord, let me follow you from home. Let me follow you anywhere but here. But Christ says stay and wait.

Now there are plenty of times to extract ourselves from harmful or dangerous situations. God doesn't ask us to stay victims of abuse or take unnecessary risks. But there are many other times when I want to get out of a situation just because it's hard or I have fears about it. Wanting to run from confrontation. Wanting to get out of a work situation that is stretching you to the limit. Wanting out of your financial situation or a heavy responsibility.

When you're in a spot like that, it's so hard to see the point. Some of you are in that place this morning. I've been there, too. I know what it's like. Being in a job where for two years all I wanted to do was escape and I could not get out. Then 15 years later, still being in the same job, I saw that God had wanted me to stay put. He had work to do in me there, and the circumstances in that job made this job possible. But I sure couldn't see it at first. Sometimes running away is all you can think about – finding some way to change your circumstances because they can't be right. But maybe Jesus is asking you to

stay in Jerusalem and wait. Maybe he has you in that very situation for a reason. Running away is never a full answer, because the problems have a way of chasing after you when you go, and you will miss out on the gift he has for you.

Lamentations 3:25-30

*GOD proves to be good to the man who passionately waits,
to the woman who diligently seeks.*

It's a good thing to quietly hope, quietly hope for help from GOD.

It's a good thing when you're young to stick it out through the hard times.

When life is heavy and hard to take, go off by yourself. Enter the silence.

Bow in prayer. Don't ask questions: Wait for hope to appear.

Don't run from trouble. Take it full-face.

The "worst" is never the worst.

I said there were two alternatives for the disciples. Besides running away, they also faced the possibility of **running ahead**.

As much as they wanted to put some distance between themselves and their enemies, they also had a newfound courage, thanks to the resurrection. They were inspired. Being inspired to do something, though, is no guarantee you'll do the right thing.

My dad grew up on a farm in Eastern Washington. Just outside the back door of the farmhouse they had a cistern to collect water. It was about 8 or 10 feet deep. One time there was a problem with the cistern, so my grandpa was down inside it, digging it deeper. My dad, little Larry, was five or six at the time, and he came out of the house to see what grandpa was doing and peered over the edge of the hole.

Now my grandpa was far enough down that he didn't see my dad. So he proceeded to toss a post hole digger up out of the hole, which smacked my dad in the head and cut his scalp. Now I'll tell you right now it was not a life threatening injury, but you know how wounds to the scalp are – they bleed profusely.

Grandpa was in a panic. And of course my grandma wasn't home at the time. He didn't know what to do, but he wanted to do something. And he wanted to do it immediately. So he grabbed a stick of butter and rubbed it all over my dad's head.

The disciples are in the same spot as my grandpa – eager to do something, but not sure what. They think Jesus is about ready to fight the Romans. They ask Jesus,

"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

They're about ready to run ahead of him. They even think it's for his benefit. But it's going to be like trying to use a stick of butter for the wrong thing.

Do you ever try to run ahead of God? Do you get enthusiastic about something and go after it before you've heard his thoughts on it? I get ideas and plans in my head all the time and start to pursue them without checking with him first. I get way ahead, going down the wrong track, when if I would just pause and wait for him, he would make it clear to me that what I've got in my hands is nothing but butter and all it's going to do is make a mess.

We want to run away or we want to run ahead, and waiting keeps us from doing either. It's on the cross itself where Jesus modeled for us what waiting is really all about. When he prayed in the garden beforehand, everything in his human nature wanted to run away. He asked his Father for any other scenario to be possible. But he refused to let fear take over. He submitted himself to God's will and stayed on course.

Then, when he was on the cross, the crowd tried to get him to run ahead. People yelled at him and said, "If you're so great, get yourself off that cross!" He could have taken matters into his own hands and found a way out of there. But he didn't run ahead. He waited until he could say, "It is finished."

That's why I think waiting is so difficult for us – it's one of the crosses we pick up and carry as we follow Christ. We picture his attitude as we learn to stay in place instead of running away or running ahead.

But we can often get the wrong idea of what it actually means to wait. It's important to recognize what Jesus did not mean when he asked his disciples to wait.

He certainly didn't mean **passively sitting around**. That's what I normally think of when I hear the word waiting. But that's exactly what the angels chided the disciples for doing.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

That sounds to me like a little kick in the backside. Get up. Get moving. There's no point in just staring at the sky. Jesus had told them to wait, but apparently that was not what he had in mind.

We see waiting as tying our hands, as if it is preventing us from doing anything. "Now all we can do is wait." Jesus saw waiting as very active. In a minute, we'll look at what we mean by that, but for now I'm just trying to break down the myth that waiting means doing nothing.

Another tendency we have when waiting is involved is to be **breaking out the calculators**.

It's the classic road trip question. You've all been there, either in the front seat or the back seat. Every five minutes: Are we there yet? How much longer? If we're going to have to wait, we want to spend our time figuring out exactly when the waiting will end. Even computers tell us how many seconds a program is going to take to load, because people want to know.

Again, Jesus responds to say that's not the best use of time when it comes to waiting. He told his followers,

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

We ask, "How much longer, God? How long am I stuck here? When can I get out of this situation?" For some reason, God has chosen to keep details about the timing of future events to himself. He wants us to stay focused on the present. We can't do that if we spend all our waiting time trying to figure out his next move.

That's not what Jesus had in mind for his disciples. He sees our waiting as involving so much more than just sitting around or calculating how long it will take.

What waiting for Jesus DOES mean is this. First, it means **being interrupted intentionally**. As we saw when we talked about running ahead, the disciples were not tracking entirely with Jesus' mission. A pause was a necessary interruption for them to get realigned. It gave them time to reflect and recenter.

There are times when God gives us a delay in our plans as a gift, because the extra space is an opportunity to determine whether or not the plans were from him in the first place.

A second aspect of waiting for God is that it means **obeying the obvious indefinitely**. The disciples hadn't been given much to do, but they did have one very clear, explicit instruction: Stay in Jerusalem. There was a lot they didn't know, but they did have that one small way in which they could know they were being obedient.

A friend of mine died this past week from alcohol poisoning. He literally drank himself to death. He had been sober for several years, then fell off the wagon and fell hard. I had talked to him in forever, and then a few months ago, he called me out of the blue. He had obviously been drinking, and he was complaining about everything. His wife had left him, he'd lost his job. His church had let him down. And he couldn't figure out why God wasn't helping him out of this situation.

We talked for a long time, and I finally said, "Gary, it seems like all your problems go back to the alcohol, and before you're going to see progress in any other areas of your life, you're going to need to quit drinking." We talked just taking the small step of calling a rehab center. But he wouldn't do it.

I realize that addictions are incredibly difficult to master, and I'm not here to judge Gary this morning. I simply am trying to say that all of us have obvious, clear instruction from

God in front of us, small steps that we already know we could or should be taking. But we ignore them and continue to complain that God isn't hearing us or helping us. We're not responsible for what God hasn't revealed to us, but we are responsible for what he has. And until he tells us what's next, our job is to obey what's right in front of us.

Do you feel stuck? Are you angry at God for your life situation? Have you been praying and nothing's happening. Sometimes we have to obey it out as much as pray it out. Obey what is right in front of you. There are a lot of people who would like to do big things for God. But sometimes I think he'd rather see us be good to our wives and love our kids and be gracious to difficult co-workers. Obey what's right in front of you.

And when it feels like the waiting is endless, don't lose heart. Don't give up! Don't throw in the towel before God comes through.

Psalm 27:13-14

I am still confident of this:

*I will see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.*

Wait for the LORD;

be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD

This is where the disciples really got something right. They may have been misguided at the beginning of the chapter. They may not have even fully understood what Jesus was talking about when he asked them to go back to Jerusalem. But they did it. They did it wholeheartedly.

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

Part of waiting for Jesus is **connecting with God's people**. The disciples shared a common love of Jesus, but these times of waiting were a chance for them to learn to really love each other as well. They didn't all just get in the same room -- the verse says they were united together. Their minds all came into agreement. Men and women, young and old. With Jesus gone, they learned they had to get along and depend on each other.

It's interesting that the unity came first -- before they had the answers, before they knew what was next. It seems like the opposite would be true, that once the vision was clear, then the people would fall in line.

Too much of the time in churches, when there is a question about what to do, it becomes an occasion for division -- not unity. But when we're really seeking God's face together,

whether it is for the direction of the church or for individual needs, it can't help but bring us closer together.

The key is in what they were doing: **praying intently about what's ahead.** That's exactly what the disciples did. Luke tells us they all joined together constantly in prayer.

Waiting is meant to push us to our knees, to drive us toward dependence on God. That's not wasted time. Prayer is our participation in God's activity.

We're going to see a lot of great things churches can do and be in the book of Acts, but none of it will materialize if we're not first and foremost a praying church. I'm so glad we have a prayer meeting scheduled for our youth ministry, because we have been waiting on God for a long time in that area. It's a concrete example of one area where we as a church can step up and do the one obvious thing, which is pray about it – that God will raise up leaders, that he will build a powerful and effective ministry for our students and those he wants to reach through them.

What are you waiting on from God right now? Habakkuk offers this encouragement:

Habakkuk 2:3

If it seems slow in coming, wait.

It's on its way. It will come right on time.

Putting this in personal terms, you can ask yourself:

1. Where's my Jerusalem? Where is the hard spot that Christ is asking you to stay right now?
2. Do I feel like running away or running ahead?
3. What's the obvious obedience for me right now?

The disciples were asked to do something very difficult and frightening and a little frustrating. But the thing that enabled them to do it was that they knew Jesus. They knew his character, and if he asked them to do it for a reason, they trusted that he wouldn't leave them hanging. They knew he was faithful and would come through on his promises. He wasn't going to leave them in the waiting room forever. And he didn't.

Henri Nouwen once wrote, "We are always waiting, but it is a waiting in the conviction that we have already seen God's footsteps." We know Christ's character. We know the waiting he did for us on the cross. And we know he has good things in store for us.

Stay in Jerusalem and wait. Everything that's ahead will be worth it.