
Why Are You Standing Here?

Acts 1:6-11

A Duke Chapel sermon preached in Baldwin Auditorium on May 17, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Why are you standing here? I know what you're thinking—"we just read the gospel!" But really, why are you standing here? That's my sermon title, actually (Please be seated). And I didn't come up with that question on my own. It's a question raised out of the sacred pages of scripture. It's a question two men in white robes ask the disciples in God's language, the King James version, "Why stand ye gazing up into heaven?" Or, as my sermon title says based on the Common English Bible translation, "Why are you standing here?" We may approach the Bible when we read it as if we are righteous lawyers interrogating the holy writ, as if we are the only ones asking questions, putting it on trial. But what we will discover is that we aren't the only ones asking questions. We are being questioned, not by two men in white robes and not even by the Bible, but by a living God. There's a question we have to answer today—why are you standing here?

There are other questions in the Bible that we hear repeated and discussed more often than the one posed today. Jesus asks on the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Jesus asks Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" Mary asks, when she learns that she will give birth to Jesus, "How can this be since I am virgin?" Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" The lamenting Psalmist raises his own question with "How long, O Lord?" Questioning is a part of the life of faith and these are questions that we may have heard before and perhaps they make the top ten list of questions in the Bible. Yet there are other questions that may not make Jerusalem headline news and are tucked away in the obituary section in the back of the newspaper. These questions are not dead but we may not want to face their tough interrogation. Yet they are still relevant for living today and today one in particular screams to be answered, "Why are you standing here?"

That's not the only question posed in this pericope. The disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Some questions have no human answers. The disciples want to know, "What are you going to do Jesus?" But they'll soon learn that's not any of their concern. And Jesus does just like Jesus does—keeps them off balance and says, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." "It is not for you to know." We want to be in the know so badly but if we knew everything there is to know we wouldn't have to trust anymore. We would need no faith if we knew it all. If we knew it all, we probably couldn't handle it all. If we knew it all, we would be God. And as I survey this room, I'm glad none of us are god. It would be strange and ironic anyway for devils, blue devils, to be God.

Our calling as disciples is not to know everything there is to know. It's okay to ask questions with the recognition that Jesus is not obligated to answer. "It's not for you to know." There's no insider information for disciples. You may ask someone whom you encounter in daily life, "How are you doing today?" and if they respond with "I'm well, as far as I know," they speak the truth. "As far as I know," indicates that our knowledge can only go so far because there are finite limits on what we know and every now and then we need to be reminded, like this morning, that "it is not for us to know." And even though we don't know, we can still be disciples because knowledge is not a prerequisite for discipleship. Systematic theology in formal theological education in seminaries may attempt to systematize God but the irony is that God cannot be controlled nor locked into any human system. We can't know everything God does. "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know from where it comes or where it goes" (John 3).

There are some things that we can't know or will never know. On May 1, 1915, the *Lusitania*, the British transatlantic passenger liner ship, considered the "greyhound of the seas," left New York for its 202nd crossing. At the time there were tensions between Britain and Germany while the United States remained officially neutral. While eleven miles off the coast of Ireland on May 7, 1915, people aboard the ship heard and felt a sharp explosion. A torpedo from a German submarine had struck the right side toward the bow. Seconds later, a massive internal

explosion rocked the ship and it immediately started sinking. The *Lusitania* disappeared beneath the waves in 18 minutes. 1,198 men, women and children—among them 128 Americans—perished. The *Lusitania*'s destruction set off a diplomatic battle between Britain, Germany and the United States. The 128 American casualties were enough for some to advocate for armed retaliation and America ultimately declared war against Germany in 1917.

Meanwhile, there was lots of speculation about the sinking. What caused the second, fatal explosion—a boiler, coal or gunpowder? There were conspiracy theories. The German embassy accused Britain of smuggling military weapons aboard the liner, which the British denied. Others claimed that Britain conspired to have the ship destroyed as a way to force American entry into the war. Why did the ship sink so fast, and was there a cover-up? These are lingering mysteries and this May is the month of the 100th anniversary of this historical disaster on the seas.

We may hunt for answers but still only questions will remain. Who was behind the assassinations of John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King, Jr.? Why did Amelia Earhart and her plane disappear as she flew over the Pacific Ocean in 1937? Why is it that when you transport something by car, it is called a shipment, but when you transport something by ship, it is called cargo? Questions, which some say, will never be truly answered. We really have to un-know the idea that we should know everything. People still waste their spiritual energy on predicting the end times when we've been told it will happen like a thief in the night and no one knows the hour. Yet we continue to desire insider knowledge but it is not for us to always know. According to philosopher Socrates, "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing."

This may be disheartening because we believe the idea that "knowledge is power." The more knowledge we have we assume the more power we will have as well. The more intellectual ascension the more strength we possess. Brighter means stronger within this frame of thought. But this concept falls off the ethical cliff when we think we are better than others because we have more knowledge—the stronger ones are the smarter ones, which then creates a hierarchy of humanity, putting the literati at the top and the least of these at the bottom. Novelist Toni Morrison, implicitly warns against this when she reminisces about reading to her grandmother. She says, "I have suspected, more often than not, that I know more than she did, that I know more than my grandfather and my great-grandmother did, but I also know that I'm no wiser than they were. And whenever I have tried earnestly to diminish their vision and prove to myself that I know more, and when I have tried to speculate on their interior life and match it up with my own, I have been overwhelmed every time by the richness of theirs compared to my own." As the apostle Paul noted, "knowledge puffs up" but the gospel suggests that knowledge doesn't even lead to power. Knowledge is impotent in the light of the power of God.

In fact, it seems as if the power may come from not knowing. "It is not for you to know...But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." We don't have to know in order to receive a gift from God. Not knowing doesn't preclude you from having power and knowledge is not a qualification for being a disciple of Jesus. Knowledge is not a requirement for being a witness to Christ; rather, power is, the power of the Holy Spirit. Power. *Dunamis*, from where we get the word 'dynamite.' This power is explosive and expansive so why in the world are you just standing looking up toward heaven? Why are you standing here, if you've received dynamite power? Your life should have an explosive influence in the world.

The power of the Holy Spirit is not for heaven. The power of God is for work on earth—"you will be my witnesses..." We don't need witnesses in heaven. We need them on earth. The Holy Spirit is not an escape valve to heaven. The Spirit empowers you for ministry on earth. Disciples are not supposed to be "gazing up" (1:10), so heavenly-minded that they neglect doing earthly-good. The disciples are called back to earth, "to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Why are you standing looking up? The power of the Spirit baptizes you *in* the world, not apart from it. Jesus' ascension is not about our ascent but about our descent into deeper mission on earth due to the descent of the Spirit. Jesus is lifted up that the power of the Spirit might be let loose in our lives.

So why are you standing here when your life is a temple of the dynamite of God? Why are you standing here, looking away from earth to avoid real everyday issues? Why are you standing here? Has the dynamite dimmed or

been destroyed? Is the fire shut up in your bones gone? Why do you stand looking up to heaven when there is so much work to do in the church and world on earth?

A recent Pew Research Center study called “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” based on a survey of 35,000 American adults, shows the Christian percentage of the U.S. population dropping to 70.6%. In 2007, the last time Pew conducted a similar survey, 78.4% of American adults called themselves Christian. Also, almost every major branch of Christianity in the United States has lost a significant number of members, mainly because millennials (those born 1980-1999) are leaving the church. More than one-third of millennials say they are unaffiliated with any faith, which is up 10 percentage points since 2007.

People who profess no faith affiliation -- often called the “nones” are now nearly 23% percent of the country's adult population putting the unaffiliated nearly on par with evangelicals (25.4%) and ahead of Catholics (about 21%) and mainline Protestants (14.7%).

The long view of the generational spans is striking as well. Whereas 85% of the silent generation (born 1928-1945) call themselves Christians, just 56% of today's younger millennials (born 1990-1996) do the same, even though the vast majority -- about eight in 10 -- were raised in religious homes. Each successive generation of Americans includes fewer Christians and a critical part of this is that older generations of Americans are not passing along the Christian faith as effectively as those who did in the past. How can we stand still when this is the state of the church?

Why are you just standing here when we continue to watch young and poor and black males, in particular, get trapped in cycles of gun violence, even implicating the police at times? Why are you just standing here when thousands of people, across the world, including the Duke community, halt traffic and shut down malls, to engage in public, nonviolent demonstrations called ‘die ins’ as rituals of public mourning? Why are you standing here when we see so much “civic estrangement”(Salamishah Tillet)?

The power, the *dunamis*, the dynamite of the Spirit is not given because we have all the answers to society’s issues; it is given and promised to break us out of our silent spiritual stagnancy. A sedentary spiritual life will kill you. The power of God is not given in order to standstill and watch from safe ecclesial sidelines. The power comes down in order to lift others up that they too may ascend while on earth. The disciples gather but through the Spirit’s power, scatter.

Dynamite explodes and disperses illuminating fire. This power is centrifugal, moving outward, beyond what is familiar, beyond Jerusalem, the center, to “all Judea and Samaria, [the margins] and to the ends of the earth.” The power of the Spirit leads us to foreign territory like Baldwin Auditorium on East Campus. The Spirit stretches us beyond our comfort zones, our knowledge, to encounter difference and experience God in a new place and in a new way. To do this kind of boundary-crossing work, you need power. You don’t need power to stay home or stuck in a rut. You need power when you are nudged toward a transgeographical, transcultural, transethnic, translinguistic, transdisciplinary ministry because it is more complex and beautiful when you enter uncharted territory guided by the presence of God.

We reveal that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit when we cross boundaries because the Spirit always takes us beyond ourselves, beyond what we know to the unknown, beyond our world to the entire world, out of a silo of sameness, in order to expand our hearts and minds. The power of God is not needed if we are only with those like us; we need power to deal with difference as the gospel nudges us away from denominational narcissism to untraveled spiritual terrain. We need power to get our feet to pray and to risk moving beyond the normative center.

The power of God explodes our illusions in thinking what we know is the best thing to know or the only thing that can be known. The Spirit will blow up our confining theologies so that we may be at “full stretch”(Don Saliers), as wide as the mercy of God for the world. Without the Spirit, our lives won’t be dynamite but dead. But with the power of the Spirit, we will sense a new way, a new life, a new beginning, a new mission in the world, as we are

propelled outward away from our norms toward the margins, which are made central to the gospel mission of Jesus through the power of the Spirit.

Our own move away from the Chapel for about a year allows us to recognize how the church is to be on the move, never stagnant, always empowered by the Holy Spirit for the missional life of God in the world. God has called us to the ends of the earth (I know that sounds like UNC Chapel Hill)—Durham or Delaware or Darfur, wherever and whatever is foreign or strange to you. And the power we will receive is the power to be witnesses. The question is not “Lord, are you going to do x, y, and z?” The question is—“What am I going to do? And, why am I just standing here?”

We receive power to do something, to be witnesses. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur makes four claims about being a witness. He says 1) the witness is not a volunteer but is one who is sent to testify; 2) the testimony of the witness is about God—Jesus is witnessed to in the testimony; 3) the purpose of the testimony is a proclamation to all people; 4) the testimony of the witness consists of the entire life, speech and action, of the witness.

It’s understandable why there may be a preference to be in the know because to receive the power of the Spirit leads you to a place of unknowing and it is risky because to be a witness is risky. The New Testament word for witness is martyr. The power of the Spirit received by disciples is the power to die. To be a witness for the Lord requires explosive, enduring power. Without power, there will be a weak witness. But with it, testifying can be terrifying because we know where it might lead. Dynamite can be scary or intimidating. It can explode some things that we like or hold on to. It can kill us and we don’t want to die to what we’ve known or what we’ve become used to, the way it’s always been. But to witness for the Lord is a death to self and the only way that is possible is with the power of the Spirit. The power of God will cause you to put your life on the line and you can’t do that standing still, gazing upward at the chapel bell tower.

The Spirit is calling us to receive power to be witnesses in the world, a chapel without walls, so why are you standing here? There’s a whole world out there that needs the love and life of Jesus. The Spirit is calling us to light up the world with spiritual dynamite. So let’s do it together. There’s a spiritual called “Witness for My Lord.” It begins with “My soul is a witness for the Lord” and then subsequent stanzas talk about different biblical characters and the singer calls the roll—Methusaleh was a witness for my Lord, Samson was a witness for my Lord, Daniel was a witness for my Lord. We know about their witness but what about yours?

A man was surprised to learn that a former professor of his, who was an atheist during his undergraduate years and once called Christianity a “helpless hangover,” had become a Christian years later. He went to the professor’s home and asked about his conversion. His former professor said that the pastor got to him. This former student was puzzled because he knew that his former professor could think rings around this particular pastor. But the former professor responded and said that the pastor did not outthink him, he outlived him. He was a witness.

The spiritual ends with, “Who will be a witness for my Lord?” Will you?