

The book of Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke

It begins with Jesus leaving the physical realm of earth

It continues with telling the story of how the followers of Jesus

lived into the fullness of what it means to follow Jesus

The book of Acts is written by Luke—the same as the Gospel

Luke was not a disciple—one of the 12 disciples

Luke is a physician and a theological historian

Luke tells us that Jesus appeared to his followers multiple times over 40 days

Jesus appears in his resurrected body—which sounds eerily like a "solid ghost" that eats

This transformed body is the beginning of God's new creation

Beginning of a heavenly reality which is fully at home in this physical world we live in

It is the beginning of heaven on earth

John the Baptist had called Israel to a baptism of repentance and renewal

Which they assumed would lead them to a re-stored Israel with God/Messiah as king

Now Jesus promises a new baptism—not with water and not the baptism of repentance

But a baptism of the Holy Spirit that would come "not many days from now"—soon!

This renewal will form them as the restored humanity with

God is becoming king of the whole world—not just of Israel

They will know this reality within themselves

God is about to do a new thing among them

But they must wait for it to happen

Don't rush it and try to go on ahead of the coming of the Holy Spirit

Waiting is hard and we too, must wait on the Presence and Power of the Spirit

The disciples/apostles/chosen followers of Jesus were confused...

Jesus chose 12 disciples—and there are 12 tribes of Israel

They assume that Jesus that Jesus is calling them to renew and restore the people of Israel

Is this the time? Is it going to happen now? Finally?

Will Jesus finally become the true King of Israel? Will Jesus set up a new government?

Why they had asked earlier if they would have top jobs in the new government

They believed when God restored Israel, the whole world would be turned around

Israel would be the top nation, ruling the rest of the world

Nothing has gone as they expected—Jesus was killed as a common criminal

Resurrected, but what did that mean?

It would have made more sense if Jesus said...—and this is how many have interpreted it

I'm going off to heaven and you must tell people how they can come too

But no—that isn't what Jesus said and that isn't the message at all

God's Kingdom will come through following Jesus—as their real world is transformed

It is the new creation—the transformation of life on earth through Jesus

But now they must wait!

Instead of knowing when and what this all means—Jesus gives them something very different...

Acts 1:8 NRSV – "...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."

My witnesses?—what does he mean?

When a new King was enthroned, heralds went throughout the world announcing it

This is their new task—you must be my witnesses from here to the ends of the world
Because of Jesus' death and resurrection—Jesus has been exalted
They are to go out as heralds and announce this truth
Not of someone who will become king at some point in the future
But of one who has already been appointed and enthroned—Jesus, Son of God
It is the Kingdom of God come in its fullness
Under God's authority, God's people are promised power through the Holy Spirit
And who are they to make this announcement to?
Jerusalem first—home
Judea—the surrounding countryside
Then Samaria—the hated semi-foreigners living right next door
And finally to the ends of the earth—everyone, everywhere
But first, you must wait!

*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... Acts 1:9-10 NRSV*
Heaven?!?

We often think of heaven as this other world in the future—our true home in the sky
The happy place where we go when we die
Expressed in this song I remember from my childhood...
*This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.
Oh Lord, you know I have no friend like you
If heaven's not my home then Lord what will I do. – Lyrics by Jim Reeves*

But in Scripture—heaven and earth are two halves of God's created world
Not—2 halves of something—identical in nature but occupying different space
Rather the substance and meaning of the same object
Like the weight of an object and the stuff it is made of
They are related ways of looking at the same thing
—2 different and interlocking dimensions
One explaining the other
Biblical earth really is the entire cosmos of space, time, and matter (not just the planet earth)
Biblical heaven is another sort of reality within this same cosmos
This other reality or other dimension is an inner reality
Biblical heaven is "God's space" and Biblical earth is "human space"
God's plan is for a new heaven and a new earth and for them to be joined as one
This is the ultimate renewal of a new creation

Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of this astonishing and world shattering renewal
Jesus isn't alive by an extraordinary miracle in which God did the impossible to show his power
As death worked backwards
Rather, on the cross Jesus dealt with the main force of evil, decay and death itself
The creative power of God is no longer thwarted by human rebellion
The creative power of God has burst forth producing the beginning—the pilot project—
The new joined-up heaven-and-earth reality which is God's plan for the whole world

The risen Jesus is the first manifestation of this new joined-up heaven-and-earth reality
Jesus risen body is not a "solid ghost" but Jesus is fully in earth and in heaven
There is no physical barrier between the two realities and Jesus moves fluidly in and out
The disciples didn't get it either!

*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... Acts 1:9-10 NRSV*

But Jesus was lifted up—going toward heaven?!?
Neither Luke nor the early Christians thought Jesus was off to some far reaches of space
They understood heaven and earth as two interlocking spheres of God's reality
Now they begin to comprehend that the risen body of Jesus is the first manifestation
And so far the only one who is fully at home in both and therefore in either
Which is in anticipation of when everything will be renewed and joined together

Jesus is lifted up to signal that he is going into "God's dimension"—into the cloud
The cloud is a sign of God's presence
Remember: Israelites in the desert followed a pillar of fire by day, cloud by night
Stories of the cloud and smoke that filled the temple when God was present
Jesus has gone into God's dimension of reality—heaven

After Jesus left their physical presence, they returned to Jerusalem—upstairs room where they stayed
*All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women,
including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. Acts 1:14 NRSV*

In this time of waiting—they gave themselves to prayer
It is in prayer and worship and Listening within that we access this God dimension
We are rarely able to see the physical reality of the God dimension
But it is no less real or present to us
Through prayer and constant interaction with God—direct connection to the living God
These ordinary, frequently muddled, deeply human beings live with God
From now on, the story of Jesus' followers takes place in both dimensions
It causes a clash with the Temple
Because the Temple was thought to be the place
where heaven and earth overlap
But the resurrection and ascension of Jesus launch a new claim to the contrary
Jesus followers don't completely understand yet and work it through
That's the story that unfolds in the book of Acts

While we wait in this place where we live in the physical cosmos of earth—we too live in God's Kingdom
We can easily access the God dimension—we are living in both worlds—both dimensions
We are most aware of it in prayer, worship, those times of Listening and being in the Presence
Rarely the curtain is pulled back and we see an angel or manifestation of God's reality
On occasion the power of God's reality overwhelms us with a sense of Presence
But mostly it is always there and we breathe it in and out, becoming more aware of its reality

This message is based on the following resource...

Acts for Everyone, Part One: Chapters 1-12 by N. T. Wright, © 2008, Westminster John Knox Press,
Louisville, KY. Message taken from the commentary on Acts 1:1-5; 6-8; 9-14.