

[Spirituality](#)
[Pencil Preaching](#)



by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)
[patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.](mailto:patrickjmarrin@gmail.com)

[Join the Conversation](#)

May 17, 2023

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)



“A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while later and you will see me” (John 16:16).

[Acts 18:1-8; Jn 16:16-20](#)

Most U.S. dioceses will celebrate the Ascension next Sunday, but others will celebrate it today, so two sets of readings are provided. The theme is the same for either option. The early church faced the critical transfer of the mission of Jesus

when he departed history, and he promised that the Holy Spirit would fill them with his identity and power. He will disappear with the Ascension and return to them in the Spirit on Pentecost, the birthday of the church, the body of Christ in the world.

Today's Gospel passage could be called the "little while" Gospel for the seven times this phrase is exchanged between Jesus and his disciples. This becomes the "pregnant pause" the evangelist uses to show how gradual the transfer of power was for the early church. The immense mystery had to be absorbed and claimed for it to become evident and active.

The disciples had to be prepared for this transfer during a dark interval filled with grief and a sense of total inadequacy. Their Ascension-to-Pentecost retreat was necessary to make sure they knew that the church was no human creation but the pure gift of God. Only when they were completely empty would they be filled with the gifts of the Spirit. As it happened, the group of disciples cowered in the upper room, praying and fasting, facing their own fears and powerlessness and waiting for God to do something they could never have done by themselves.

Today we know this narrative all too well, including our sense of inadequacy to take up the mission of Jesus. We experience this as a group and as individuals. The average parish struggles to live up to the Gospel ideals. Each of us, despite our intentions to grow spiritually and be more courageous in living our faith, encounters the same inertia and obstacles to greater discipleship.

So, we need Pentecost. Only God can initiate the call to deeper growth. Only the Holy Spirit can guide us in the use of our natural gifts to effect supernatural results.

What this interval between the Ascension and Pentecost asks us to do is to pray, to open ourselves to the promise that God is sending in the Holy Spirit. If we offer God our hearts, as inadequate and fearful as we know them to be, God will fill us with insight and new possibilities.

So much of discipleship is just getting up, showing up, doing our best, then trusting that God will take our small gifts and multiply them. Only God can do this, but if we are willing instruments and partners to the divine graces being poured out, we trust that we will share in the evangelization of the world.

We engage our lives in a succession of "little whiles," ordinary intervals of waiting and initiative that over time show our progress. Our commitment to keep God before us and the Spirit in our hearts is the measure of progress the whole church

can make in its mission. This is what we are praying for as we anticipate Pentecost.