

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor**  
**“The People’s Choice: Whatever became of the disciples?”**  
**Acts 1: 1-18, 21-26**  
**June 25, 2017**

Today marks the second Sunday in our summer worship series, “The People’s Choice.”

When invited to submit topics for the series, a DCPC member wrote: We never hear much about the disciples after the Crucifixion. Did they go back to their previous lives and homes? How did they remain focused and committed? They seemed, by and large, to meet terrible ends. How do their stories relate to us in today's world? What lessons are there? Always wondered.

We take as our starting place Acts 1.

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Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Thomas, Matthew, Philip, Bartholomew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas the son of James (or Thaddeus), Judas Iscariot.

In our mind’s eye, we see them with Jesus in da Vinci’s famous rendering of the Last Supper.

In response to the People’s Choice challenge from one of you, I will consider the apostles with you in the following manner:

First, by referring to what we can read about them in the Bible itself.

Second, by giving a nod to what the Bible may seem to say about some of them but about which contemporary scholarship would tell us needs an explanatory word.

Third, by giving a glancing nod to a few of the fantabulous stories about the later life of the apostles which aren’t in the Bible at all.

Fourth, by passing on one preacher’s thoughts about what the apostles’ lives after the resurrection and ascension may have to say to 21st century Christians like you and me.

Let’s begin by considering what the Bible itself says about the apostles after the resurrection.

The place we turn for this is the Book of Acts, that being the sequel that Luke wrote to his gospel and the only book in the New Testament to offer a post-resurrection narrative account.

And what does Acts say about what happened to the apostles?

Acts speaks several times of the apostles in the aggregate. There is a line in Acts 4 that I love that sums up their continuing commitment to Christ and to one another: “With great power the

apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” (Acts 4: 33)

Acts speaks several times of the apostles in the aggregate and their common ministry, but as for individual apostles, with the exception of Peter, it says very little.

I’ll speak of Peter later in the sermon, but with regard to the other ten apostles, only two others are mentioned explicitly. James gets a mention in Acts 12—he was killed by the sword upon the order of the emperor Nero. James’s brother John was Peter’s companion in the days immediately following Jesus’s resurrection and ascension. He, like Peter, is described as being ordinary and uneducated (4:13) but bold in refusing to be silent about what they have seen and heard. In the aftermath of the healing of a lame man, he was arrested and beaten and then released. The last we hear of John is in Acts 9 when readers are told that after preaching in Samaria, John returned to Jerusalem.

Now, it is true that there are books in the New Testament which bear the names of apostles: Matthew, John, James, I, II, III John, I and II Peter. In the cases of some of these books, the writers of the respective books would seem to hint that it was an apostle who was the author.

However, it is important to note that scholarship had dated these writings as taking place at later dates—into the second and third centuries--than would have been possible for eyewitness apostles. The writers weren’t plagiarizing, but rather following the common literary practice of assuming the names and the literary identities of respected personages to give an increased heft of faith to their writings. One might say that it was a way of continuing and strengthening the witness of the apostles as these writings were passed down from generation to generation.

Just so, as the years passed, the church developed a voracious appetite for heroic fiction about its founding figures. According to the early church father Tertullian, the apostle John was immersed in boiling oil and emerged unscathed. Supposedly there is a bone from the finger of Thomas, the very finger which touched the wounds of Jesus, in the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Rome. Thomas is celebrated today as the founder of the Christian Church in India. St. Andrew did not go to Scotland and found the game of golf, although it is a legend that he died on an X-shaped cross, the cross which now adorns the Scottish flag. Andrew is said to have gone to Greece.

Despite the legends, when one actually reads the biblical material—and I happily am discovering that writing sermons in response to the topics that you have submitted is pressing me to engage Scripture in ways that I likely would not otherwise do....such as reading through the entire book of Acts at one sitting, which I have not done in a long, long time, and, by the way, I heartily recommend it to give you a great sense of just how the beginnings of the Christian church are at one and the same time both miraculous and extremely ordinary at one and the same time---what strikes the reader is that the apostles are people more akin to you and me than unlike us.

I promised that I would return to Peter. Acts devotes more ink to Peter than to any of the other apostles. He preaches, he teaches, he heals, he gets authorities riled up, he gets arrested, he gets put in jail, but then gets out and when he knocks on the door of Mary’s house, the maid Rhoda comes to the door and when she sees Peter, she gets so excited that she totally forgets to unlock the door and just leaves him cooling his heels on the doorstep, still banging on the door. Acts says simply in Acts 9:32 that Peter ministered “here and there,” and the last words of Peter’s that Acts records are these, “we believe we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as the Gentiles will.”

And it is Peter's final witness to the grace of the Lord Jesus which leads to some concluding thoughts concerning the question, what do the lives of the first-century apostles have to do with you and me?

Emily Heath is a United Church of Christ pastor in New Hampshire. In a recent article she wrote, "Perhaps this is wrong, but I have a hard time trusting church people who never admit imperfection. I don't mean imperfection of the minor kind. I don't care that your kids' school lunches aren't perfectly balanced, or that you skipped yoga class three times last week. I mean real imperfection. You got addicted to something. You got fired from your job. Or you messed up big time and it was all your fault.

When people and things at a church are just a little too neat and tidy, I get a little curious about that church's spiritual life. Why? Because no one's life is neat and tidy, and Christians should be the first ones to admit that.

Christians are people who have received grace. We should be people who know at our bedrock that we once were broken badly, and that God loved us and lifted us up.

I was recently speaking at a conference and I was asked what I saw as the best indication that a congregation will die. I replied, 'A church that is full of people who cannot tell you about God's grace in their own lives.'

Why? Because people who know that they have received God's grace, and who don't forget it, know what church is all about. It's not about keeping up appearances. It's not about appearing morally righteous. It's not about saying the right things and getting ahead. It's about knowing that you once were lost and now are found.

Until we are a church full of people that can tell the stories of our rock bottoms without shame, we will never be a church that truly can share God's grace." (1)

When we consider the lives of the apostles, the people we encounter are nothing less than ordinary human beings like you and me, human beings who were broken badly, whose lives were transformed by the grace of God which they encountered in Jesus, and who shared the gift of God's grace, passing it on with great power so that other lives could be transformed too.

Let us not grow weary in joining them, shall we?

1. Emily Heath, "Remembering Grace," June 23, 2017, [http://www.ucc.org/daily\\_devotional\\_remembering\\_grace](http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_remembering_grace)

Note: Various portions of this sermon are based on Bryan M. Litfin, *After Acts: Exploring the Lives and Legends of the Apostles* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015).