



## "STAY IN THE CITY" – LUKE 24:46-49 & ACTS 1:1-5

*Pentecost 2024*

*By: Reverend Ari Colston Johnson*

---

“We will not be intimidated, distracted, or talked down. **We will remain.**” Those were the words from the student encampment for Palestine at the University of Chicago. For the last few weeks, many of us have watched the news and social media coverage of encampments at colleges across the United States. From coast to coast, students laid down their sleeping bags in university greens, pitched tents, and braved violence from police and counter-protesters to demand an end to university investments in the Israeli war machine.

Despite the risks to their safety and academic futures, student-activists have done just what Students for Justice in Palestine promised: they have remained. Universities issued warnings, but the protesters wouldn't leave. Administrators sent ominous emails threatening them with expulsion and eviction, but they wouldn't leave. On many campuses, police arrived wielding tear gas, rubber bullets, and brute force. Surrounded by officers, students at Yale University danced and sang, “I'm gonna free all of Palestine down by the riverside, down by the riverside, down by the riverside. I ain't gone study war no more...” But they didn't leave.

Within this context of campus occupations and justice for Palestine, an obscure detail of the Pentecost story comes alive to us this Sunday. Most of us know *what* happens on Pentecost, but the events of 2024 beg a closer reflection on *where* Pentecost took place in the text. Lost within the drama of the ascension and the great commission are the gospels' conflicting reports of Jesus's whereabouts after the resurrection. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus returns to the hills of Galilee where his ministry began

and, with the great commission, sends the disciples abroad before ascending to heaven. Dispersed into the far corners of the world, the disciples temporarily leave Jerusalem and its traumas behind. Luke, on the other hand, couldn't be more different. Not only does the author of Luke shift the scene from Galilee to the outskirts of Jerusalem; in Luke's gospel, Jesus leaves the disciples with an unusual command: "stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). The location of the Pentecost event is so important to the Lukan tradition that the author narrates it twice—first in Luke 24 and again in the first chapter of Acts: "*Do not leave Jerusalem*" (Acts 1:4). In Matthew's gospel, Eastertide is about the mandate to *go* ("make disciples of all nations"), but in Luke, Jesus orders the faithful to *stay*.

We can only grasp how significant—how counterintuitive, even how positively *backward*—this command was to the disciples by revisiting the tumultuous political context around Jesus's death and resurrection. Though it was respected as a holy and historic city, Jerusalem also had a reputation for unrest by the time of Jesus. The city was constantly at the center of riots, revolts, and tensions over occupation and religious authority, especially during the Jewish festival season. Only a month before the events of Luke 24/Acts 1, another strained Passover had ended in the death-by-crucifixion of another radical agitator: Jesus of Nazareth. The reestablishment of Roman military "order" after his execution forced Jesus's remaining followers either into hiding or fleeing back to the countryside. The streets of Jerusalem weren't so different from the images of cities we see on the news today. Armed soldiers/police were likely stationed at every major street corner, decked out in their military uniforms and crests. They stood on the lookout for suspicious persons or associates of "that Jesus guy." With one word from the prefect of Jerusalem, they would violently quell any protests. And of course, the Roman-backed temple elites would discourage any resistance with lectures about "peace" and respecting the empire.

In light of these dangers, Jesus's order to stay in the city was more than a big ask; it was terrifying. Jerusalem was the *last* place anyone associated with Jesus would want to go, let alone *stay*.

To wrap our historical imagination around the danger and undesirability of Jerusalem in the disciples' time, we only need to think about the stigma cities carry in our own modern landscape. Throughout US history, "the inner city" and "the urban core" have been synonymous with the "slums," "the hood," and "the ghetto." Set against the white, middle-class values of the suburbs, cities are associated

with the underprivileged and excluded. Politicians deemed them a “problem.” Police made them “war zones.” Christians called them “vice dens.” Between the 1960s and 1980s, even well-to-do, “silk stocking” Black Christians (including AMEs) left their low-income neighbors in a mass exodus to the suburbs, content to commute to their inner-city churches for Bible study and Sunday service only. Now historic urban worship spaces are feeling the decline. Facing gentrification and displacement in the twenty-first century, AME churches are selling their sanctuaries at unprecedented rates—leaving what *used to be* Black neighborhoods where the residents no longer look like us. Whether in ancient Jerusalem or the modern concrete jungles of Philly, ATL, and New York, when things get hard in the city our first impulse is to *abandon* it, **not to stay**.

Because in the back of our minds, *the city* is the site of “broken homes,” under-funded schools, “delinquent” youth, and “pathological” poverty.

*The city* was ground zero of a War on Drugs that sent militarized police into predominantly Black communities.

*The city* is always consumed by so-called “lawless” behavior, from the race riots of the 1960s to the student encampments of 2024.

*The city* embodies the messy terrain of systemic injustice and unequal opportunity.

*The city* represents the conditions we don’t want to fix, the people we don’t want to love, the politics we would rather “stay out of,” and the problems we would rather flee than face.

Why, then, would Jesus not only call but *order* his followers to stay in the city? How could a place where poverty abounds, opportunity is denied, and resources are few become the site of God’s power?

Jesus’s words in Luke 24 and Act 1 call us back to the hard part of the gospel that cities force us to confront—our obligation to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, house the homeless, care for the sick, and humanize the prisoner. The prelude to Pentecost is a reminder that the gospel is lived out in uncomfortable spaces. It highlights the church’s beginnings and shapes its modern mission. By commanding the disciples to “stay in the city” and “do not leave,” Jesus establishes the church in the trenches. The Holy Spirit did and does not fall on the safe, secure, and content. The founding place of the church is in the heart of danger, propelled by people under the surveillance of the Roman

empire, held in suspicion by the law, and deemed a threat by the religious and political authorities. Pentecost takes place:

- In a secret meeting of apostles in Jerusalem
- At a Philadelphia blacksmith's shop in 1794
- Among the student encampments in New York, Atlanta, and Los Angeles
- Where activists occupy the streets in solidarity with Palestine, Sudan, Haiti, and the Congo.

*Here* is Pentecost. And even though it would be easier to run away, this Sunday Jesus demands we fight our corner and *stay in the city*. Stay in the city when the message you bear is rejected by politicians and suppressed by those in power. Stay in the city when the work of the gospel comes without worldly reward.

Stay amidst the turmoil.

Stay when there is risk and insecurity.

Stay, even if you're afraid.

Stay because the promises and power of God outweigh your fear.

Stay, and Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will meet you in a flame. You will be baptized with fire and clothed with power from on high. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Stay in the city because your deliverance is at hand. Amen. *This sermon is dedicated to student encampments across the world and to the people of Palestine determined to **stay** in their indigenous lands. End the war in Gaza and free Palestine.*

---

**The Reverend Ari Colston Johnson** is a Ph.D. student in Religion at Princeton University with interests in law, African American religion, and urban studies. She is an ordained Itinerant Elder in the Sixth Episcopal District, and she currently serves on staff at Greater Mt. Zion AME Church in Trenton, NJ.