Into the Unknown is the biggest hit of Disney’s Frozen sequel, released last November. The lyrics of this song have struck me as all the more timely the longer this pandemic has stretched on.

In case you have not memorized the words with the help of a five year old like I have, let me read some of it to you. The scene from the movie begins with Elsa awakening in the middle of the night to the sound of a mysterious voice and the twinkle of the Northern Lights.

She sings, “I can hear you but I won’t. Some look for trouble while others don’t. I’ve had my adventure, I don’t need something new. I’m afraid of what I’m risking if I follow you, Into the Unknown.”

In the movie, Elsa chooses to follow the mysterious voice on an adventure out beyond all that she has ever known.

As I hear this song, playing ad infinitum at my house many of these pandemic days, I am captured by how much I feel we have all been thrust, through no choice of our own, into a world of unknown unlike any of us now living have ever dealt with before. In today’s scripture from Acts, the disciples are about to be thrust into their own unknown adventure after Jesus ascends to heaven on a cloud.

Before he goes, the disciples ask Jesus if he is going to restore Israel in the ways that they expected. I suspect they also want to know more about just where he’s going and importantly, what they can expect to happen next. But Jesus remains quite vague about the details. Instead, he tells them, “It is not for you to know.”

I don’t know about the disciples, but I would really like to know a lot more about the future than I do right now. It’s hard for me to swallow, but I have begun to consider that maybe the words of Jesus are for me too. “It is not for you to know.” I’ve begun to consider what it is I feel I’m risking by facing the reality of all this unknown.

The disciples were risking quite a bit in their experience of the unknown. Their beloved teacher had been crucified after all and they had no way of knowing which one of them might be next. So, they hid together in an upper room, following the instructions of Jesus to wait in Jerusalem for the quote “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” which we now celebrate as Pentecost but that they knew very little about.

Did you catch that he asked them to wait in Jerusalem, the city in which he himself was crucified and where the religious leaders who hastened that execution were still in power? Do you suppose some of them wanted to scatter? Do you suppose they fought
among themselves about whose turn it was to go out for groceries? Do you suppose they grew impatient, waiting for the promised Holy Spirit to show up and re-open their ideas of any future plans?

Still, it says they returned to that upper room even after Jesus mysteriously ascended to heaven on a cloud. They returned to the community waiting for them there. That community includes some men who get named, some women who don’t, and folks who fit under the catch-all term: brothers, or in the Greek, adelphos, all those from the same womb. I wonder if it is a term that describes the family they had become.

They waited in uncertainty but they did not wait alone. They waited together in that Upper Room. Neither do we wait alone. We are connected through virtual means and by the messages, prayers, and care we extend to each other. For me, this virus has shown very clearly that my well-being relies strongly on my neighbors’ well-being. In the wake of this global pandemic, it’s ever more clear to me that my neighbor extends to all the other human beings on the planet.

We are indeed bound together and at their best those connections are finely woven with love. We may long to know when our state will fully re-open safely or when a vaccine will be found for this virus. We may long to know how our health will fare through this time including our physical, emotional, social, spiritual and financial health. We may long to find what we can do to be helpers to each other in this uncertain time.

But we do not wait alone. We wait bound together with all other living beings on the planet. We wait bound together with all our ancestors who have lived through the pandemics, crises, disasters, and wars of the past. We wait bound together with the disciples who waited in their own uncertainty. Even when we disagree, find ourselves exhausted, impatient, or fearful, we are bound together and finely woven in the love of our risen Christ.

It took me weeks of frequent neighborhood walks to discover a marble statue of Mary that I had walked by many times before. She stands over the doors of a nearby church, arms outstretched to the would-be entering worshippers below. I think of her as one of the details of my day-to-day life that have come more sharply into focus for me as the pandemic has stretched on. I have found comfort pausing there under her arms and gazing up at her unmoved face.

So, I was startled this week to imagine the disciples standing in the same posture, looking up as Jesus ascended on a cloud and any tangible experience they had of him evaporated before their eyes. That’s just about when the angels step up in the story to ask what the disciples are looking for, gazing up toward heaven. It’s a rhetorical question. What they’re really there to say is Jesus will return just as they saw him go.

While they don’t hang out there for all time looking up, the early disciples did expect Jesus to return on a cloud while they were yet living. By the time Acts is being written down, however, followers were coming to terms with the delay of that expected return.

We too, it seems to me, are being asked to come to terms with a longer disturbance to our previous way of doing things than we may have anticipated, for which the response
of those early disciples may have something to teach us. Though Luke and Acts are written by the same author, biblical scholar Barbara E. Reid notes there is a shift in thinking about the end times between the two books. While Luke warns of the imminent second coming of Jesus, Acts finds the disciples making a shift toward “practices for living the gospel day-to-day” and toward acknowledging the “timeless presence of God already inaugurated in a new way with the coming of Jesus.”

Standing on the sidewalk, gazing up, I have thought about how I might do that myself. I don’t know what the unknown future holds. But I never have. What I have found I can trust in is the timeless presence of God, revealed for me in powerful ways by Jesus Christ. That timeless presence does affect my day-to-day living. In fact, I have found that for me the greater the unknown, the more simple everyday beauty, kindness, and connection matter.

This time has fueled the flames of a reverence in me for a warm cup of tea, the blooming of wildflowers, a phone call from a friend, the kindness of strangers, and for other beauties I’ve never noticed before. If I can, I would like to take that appreciation with me into whatever comes next. Because I don’t believe these things are trivial. I believe they are one means of growing more fully aware of the timeless presence of God.

There have been and there will be still real risks to face as we move forward into the unknown together. I am grateful that as we move forward into whatever comes next, we do not go alone. I am grateful for the timeless presence of God in my everyday living, regardless of what each day brings. I am grateful, that, even in the face of the unknown, we remain connected to each other, to the Earth, and to our risen Christ.

May it be so, Amen.