

St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
Ascension Sunday
May 23, 2004

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Acts 1: 1-11

¹ *In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

⁶ *So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

⁹ *After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*

¹⁰ *They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (NIV)*

We Are His Witnesses

Do you ever watch crime dramas? There's a classic plotline in crime dramas on TV or in the movies. Someone sees crime being committed, for instance, by a mafia-type bad guy. And so, this person becomes a witness. Some questions thicken the plot: will the witness have courage to testify at trial? When he does testify, will he tell the truth? Those he'll testify against want to stop him; will they? Will the witness be kept safe? Will he be protected?

A witness is someone who does two basic things: 1) a witness sees or hears something, and 2) he or she talks about it.

Forty days after he rose from the dead, Jesus ascended into heaven. Before he ascended, Jesus said something to his disciples. He said, "You will be my witnesses." He said this to his disciples. This is important for us to know, because

he has called us to be his disciples. With these words Jesus commissioned us to be witnesses. And with the other words he said that day, he focuses us on that task and gives us encouragement to carry it out. We Are His Witnesses. Think about this truth in two parts: 1) It's too late—we've seen too much, and 2) Jesus promises us power and protection so that we can share that message.

It's too late—we've seen too much

The book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke (Luke traveled and worked with the Apostle Paul). Luke is writing to a man named Theophilus. He writes about Jesus: After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

On Easter, the disciples weren't sure if Jesus had really risen, so he convinced them. Jesus overcame their weakness and doubt by appearing to them many times. He let them touch him and speak with him. He ate food with them; he was real flesh and blood. He appeared to the disciples in the locked room, to the men on the way to Emmaus, to Thomas, who had demanded to stick his hand into Jesus' side. Jesus gave "many convincing proofs" that he was alive.

Not only did Jesus appear to his friends, but he spoke to them as well. He spoke about the kingdom of God. When Jesus used that phrase "kingdom of God," he usually was not referring to a place. "The kingdom of God" rather refers to God's activity, how God reigns as king among people. In the days after his resurrection, he must have explained to his disciples what he had been up to when he died and then rose back to life. We heard Luke record in his Gospel: He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (Luke 24: 44-47)

I suppose that what Jesus was doing was similar to what an attorney does with a witness the day before the witness is to take the stand in court. The attorney will review the witness's testimony, making sure that facts are straight. Then the witness can declare the truth confidently and accurately.

Jesus' instruction of the apostles was important, then, because they were going to testify about him. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Jesus was about to end his visible presence on earth. He would still be with his friends, but not visibly. Jesus would no longer be the one to walk around and tell others about himself; now his apostles, as well as all that believed in him, would do that work. They had seen Jesus, and now Jesus promised that they would testify about him. They would do this in Jerusalem, their headquarters, in Judea, the territory in which Jerusalem was located, in Samaria, the neighboring territory, and in the entire world—an ever-widening circle.

But the apostles had something else in mind... "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" They had seen triumph over nature, over

death and hell; he had mastery over all. This would be a perfect time, they must have thought, for Jesus to clean house in Jerusalem, kicking out the Romans, and set up an earthly kingdom. Jesus should rule in glory on earth—right now. Oh, and the apostles then should rule with him. They smelled power and an easy life provided by Jesus.

Jesus says that this is not the work he has in mind for them at this time: He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. Jesus knew that day was coming—the day he would return visibly to earth, proclaim his judgment on all, and rule with his believers. As Paul says, Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. (2 Timothy 2:11,12a) That time, however, was yet to come. The Father knew when Jesus would come again. Until that time, the disciples were to be witnesses, not worldly rulers.

Isn't it that way on TV? When someone witnesses a crime and has to testify, they'd rather not. It's intimidating. But they are witnesses nonetheless. They've seen too much. They are witnesses.

So are we. But wouldn't we rather skip to the good part: health, wealth and power provided by Jesus? Jesus says, "Not yet. Now, you are my witnesses." It's too late; this is what we are. We've seen too much. We have seen Jesus in his word. We have heard him speak through that word. We have encountered the living Lord.

Did you notice how Jesus phrased it: "You *will be* my witnesses." Not, "In the future, there is a possibility that you might someday be my witnesses." We *are* his witnesses. We have experienced firsthand his compassion and forgiveness. We have had our sins taken away. We have been given a perfect status with God as a free gift. We are witnesses of him, of his mercy, of his generosity. We've seen too much not to be witnesses.

Now Jesus calls on us to testify. What he's after is that we simply share with other people what Jesus has done. When people ask about our beliefs, Jesus wants us to take the opportunity to talk to them about what we believe. When someone is asking about Christianity, the love of Jesus moves us to tell them, in simple words, what we have seen and heard. And the way we do everything we do, going about the routines of our lives—Jesus would have us do all things in a way that brings honor to him. Maybe people would even be led to ask us why we are the way we are, and that could open a door to telling them. "I know someone cares about me. It's Jesus. He laid down his life for me. Now everything I do is affected by his love for me."

We've seen too much; we are his witnesses.

He promises power and protection

In the movies, when a witness to a crime is about to testify in court, he needs protection. Maybe he's going to testify that some mob boss did something. The police have to make sure that some of the don's men don't "whack" the witness before he can testify. The feds might even put the witness in the Witness Protection Program. They'll do everything they can to encourage him to testify.

The disciples needed encouragement like that. Up until recent weeks, Jesus had been always by their sides. Jesus had, for the most part, done the talking. Jesus had been the teacher and they the learners, the disciples. Now, however, Jesus was about to ascend into heaven. He would still be with them, but not visibly. And now the disciples were apostles, men sent out by Jesus to tell others about him. Now they would be the ones doing the talking.

Jesus had promised to help them. In John 14 we hear Jesus say, But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:26) The Holy Spirit, God himself, would be with them and in them, giving them the understanding they needed to tell of Jesus accurately and confidently. Remember, they had just asked a question that betrayed their foggy understanding of Jesus' purpose, not to mention their purpose as apostles of Jesus. The Holy Spirit would clarify things for them.

The Holy Spirit would impart boldness as well. Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. The apostles had been timid. They had, just weeks before, locked themselves up in a room for fear of the Jews. But not after the Holy Spirit came. Ten days after Jesus ascended, on the festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came and gave to the apostles a special dose of his power. These men who were once timid and fearful now became bold preachers, speaking to thousands in public. The Holy Spirit did this.

Jesus promised a goal for their labor. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." The work they were to do would be hard and lonely at times, but Jesus would come back. The angel promised that he would return in glory, visibly as they had seen him go. The apostles would see their friend again.

Friends, we too are his witnesses. The Holy Spirit has worked in our hearts, giving us faith in our Lord. He gave us the message of Jesus and brought its blessings to our souls. As the Holy Spirit did with the apostles, he gives us greater understanding about our Savior. Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians: I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. (Ephesians 1:17) Each hour spent in Bible study is an hour getting to know Jesus better. And the better we know him, the easier it is to share him with other people.

The enormity of the task is intimidating. But the Holy Spirit's power is equal to it. The apostles saw amazing things happen when the promised Spirit came. The Word went out around the world. The Spirit overcame obstacles of murderous persecution, cross-ethnic ministry challenges and language barriers and many more hardships. He used believers to spread the message of Jesus everywhere.

He will help us also. He will help us talk to our neighbors and friends about Jesus. He will bless our efforts to send missionaries to cities all over our country and into the entire world. The Holy Spirit is still at work.

We'll see Jesus, too. He will come again in glory. And when he does, we will see all those who believed in him. We'll see those people whom the Spirit brought to faith through the witness of the apostles. We'll see those whom the Spirit brought to faith through *our* witness. By his grace and by the power of the Spirit, there will be more saved souls than we can count.

We skipped over the opening words of the book of Acts. There were some strange words there: In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven. What's unusual is the word "began". Luke recorded more than the beginning of Jesus' ministry, didn't he? Didn't he also record the end of Jesus' work and teaching, his ascension?

No, he does not. You see, Jesus' work did not stop when he ascended to heaven. Jesus would continue to do things, to teach—through his witnesses, through people who saw him, who experienced his grace, who heard what he said. He would work through them and speak through them.

Guess what? Jesus is still working and speaking. He's doing it through us, for we are his witnesses. We've seen too much, and the love we've seen compels us to testify. But remember his promise, which is as true today as when it was first spoken: "Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." Amen.