

Bearing Witness

May 24, 2020

Scripture: Acts 1: 6-14

⁶ While the apostles were still with Jesus, they asked him, "Lord, are you now going to give Israel its own king again?" ⁷ Jesus said to them, "You don't need to know the time of those events that only the Father controls. ⁸ But the Holy Spirit will come upon you and give you power. Then you will tell everyone about me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and everywhere in the world." ⁹ After Jesus had said this and while they were watching, he was taken up into a cloud. They could not see him, ¹⁰ but as he went up, they kept looking up into the sky. Suddenly two men dressed in white clothes were standing there beside them. ¹¹ They said, "Why are you men from Galilee standing here and looking up into the sky? Jesus has been taken to heaven. But he will come back in the same way that you have seen him go."

¹²⁻¹³ The Mount of Olives was about half a mile from Jerusalem. The apostles who had gone there were Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon, known as the Eager One, and Judas the son of James. After the apostles returned to the city, they went upstairs to the room where they had been staying. ¹⁴ The apostles often met together and prayed with a single purpose in mind. The women and Mary the mother of Jesus would meet with them, and so would his brothers.



Good morning! We have spent these past five weeks of Eastertide exploring the closeness we can experience with Jesus Christ and with one another. Throughout the gospels we see Jesus and his disciples modeling what it means to live in love.

Love guided all they did as they lived and related to one another. They cared deeply for one another. They shared life's struggles with one another. They boldly proclaimed their faith with one another. They were even vulnerable and intimate with one another. As I shared last week, they were able to fully live in love because they held firm to a faith that freed them from the concerns and cares of this world. Jesus modeled this for them as he lived with an absolute trust in God the Father. The early disciples came to have that same trust in God incarnate, in Jesus himself. Last Sunday we looked at how they must have felt in those moments just after Jesus washed their feet and spoke of betrayal and denial and of his impending death. All that has happened, and they have come to understand that Jesus was resurrected, that he is alive. As the Book of Acts opens, Luke begins by recounting how the disciples saw the risen Christ many times during the forty days after Easter Sunday. Just prior to today's passage, Jesus has once again promised them that he will "*baptize with the Holy Spirit not many days from now*". Today is Ascension Sunday on the church calendar. As we explore this passage from Acts 1 this morning, we will unpack Jesus' final earthly words to his disciples. As we prepare to do that, let us pray...

The earliest disciples had spent three years traveling with Jesus. During that time, they tried to soak up every tidbit that Jesus taught, and they were also deeply formed by the miracles and signs that revealed him to be the Messiah, the son of God. Over the course of the last forty days, as Jesus appeared and once again taught and offered signs, the disciples focused even more on all that Jesus had to share with them. They were like dry sponges, soaking up Jesus. But they were still like their old selves in ways. This is demonstrated in verse six.

It is here that the disciples ask, "*Lord, are you now going to give Israel its own king again*"? They think this is the big moment, the grand finale. Que up the snare drum and blast the trumpets! Rally the troops and fire the canons! Give us another like the great King David! Peter and James and John and the rest of the disciples thought that this was when Jesus would finally become the Messiah that all of Israel had been longing for. The disciples would not be alone in holding this dream, this vision for the Messiah. There was a long and deep desire in Israel for God to restore them to the glory days, to the time when they were a power on the world stage.

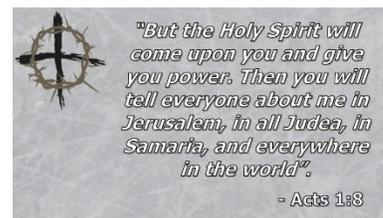


As they ask, "*Lord, is it now?*" I imagine Jesus felt like the screen bean on the right in this image. But, in reality, we have these same moments, don't we? At times such as we are now in, we look to God and hope that all will instantly be just like it was. Yesterday, right? And at other times we look to God and long for our dream to be realized. We have come to understand that said dream will never come to be and most days we accept it. For example, I came to the realization in ninth grade that I would never play in the NFL. At 5'1" and about 105 pounds and with limited athletic ability, I came to grips with that fact. But that still doesn't stop me from dreaming, every once in a while, as I watch a game on TV. Over and over Jesus taught that his kingdom was not of this earth and that to be truly great one must be a servant to all. But old dreams die hard. Jesus understood this. He simply tells them, "*You don't need to know the time of those events that only the Father controls*". In essence he is telling them not to worry about things that they cannot control. Instead, Jesus says, focus in, boys, on what you can control.



In these days, this is a reminder we often need too. For people who like to be in control, who like to do certain things, these days have been and will continue to be hard. It has been an adjustment to fit within someone else's parameters and guidelines – namely the government and CDC. Even as we have gradually begun to reopen the world, it has been a challenge at times to stay within safe and wise measures and practices. On Monday morning, for example, Kristin and Abby and I stopped by my parents' place at West Hills Village in Rapid City. We walked around to the deck and waved in the window until my Dad saw us. We stood on the ground at the edge of the deck and they stood inside the house, right up next to the screen door. We so wanted to give them a hug, to touch them before we left. But we knew we could not. I am sure this is an experience that almost everyone has been through and felt. During this time, God has said over and over, in a variety of ways, just do what you can do. Do what you can do and trust in my sovereignty. Do what you can do and trust that it is enough.

Pointing the disciples in the direction that they can control, Jesus says to them, *"But the Holy Spirit will come upon you and give you power. Then you will tell everyone about me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and everywhere in the world"*. Imagine their shock when Jesus' response to

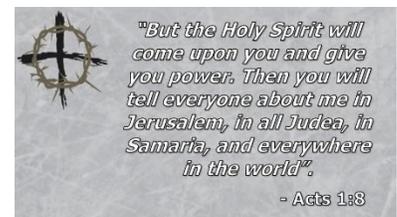


the question about him returning to establish the new kingdom is the revelation that it is they who will be the builders of the new kingdom. For all practical purposes, Jesus is saying, "Not me, but you". Pause with me a minute and imagine yourself there when Jesus shares these words. As you are dreaming about a new king riding in on a big white horse, slaying Romans left and right, you are awakened to hearing Jesus say, "No, you will have the power",

“You will be the one who will proclaim the gospel not only here, but TO THE ENDS of the world”. Imagine hearing that you will be the one filled with the power of the Holy Spirit who will take the message of hope and love to the whole world. Then I would look a lot like the guy on the right!



Jesus is reminding his followers that the promised Holy Spirit will be with them, bringing them power. But the empowering by the Holy Spirit also comes with an assignment: to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ throughout the world. My friends, the assignment remains the same. Who knows our United Methodist denominational mission statement? It reads, *"to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world"*. Now, no turning around. What is our church's mission statement? This church's mission statement reads, *"to bring people to Christ, to help people grow deep in Christ"*. Unless something has changed that I am unaware of, this verse is still the primary role assigned to all followers of Jesus. Just as Jesus said to his disciples long ago, he continues to say to us: "Be my witness".



To help us all understand what this charge entails, let us first consider what it means to be a witness. To be a witness means both to see and to share. First, we must see – we must observe, understand, accept, and come to believe in Jesus as our own personal Lord and Savior. The first disciples saw a lot in their three years with Jesus. They saw firsthand healings and other miracles. They saw hearts and lives transformed. They saw love and mercy and grace and obedience and absolute trust lived out right before their eyes.

My friends, we too have seen and heard. We too have read and heard about the life and teachings of Jesus and we have even personally experienced the power of Jesus in our lives and in the lives of those we know – healing, transforming, restoring. The second half the charge to bear witness is to share. Jesus' last command to the disciples was to go forth into the whole world to share what they had seen so that others would know who Jesus was and what God did through him. This command to share – I believe it is a standing command.



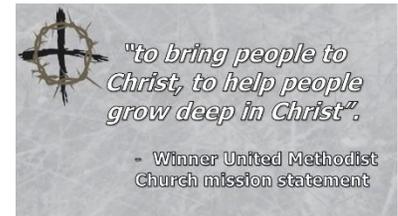
Why is this command to bear witness, to tell everyone about Jesus, to make disciples for the transformation of the world, to bring others to Christ and to help them

grow deep in Christ so important that it was Jesus' last words to his followers? It is really quite simple. To know Jesus is to know the way, the truth, the life. To know Jesus is to know healing and wholeness and peace and joy and love. To know Jesus is to know contentment and peace. I cannot imagine life without Jesus. Can you? That is why this command is so important.

The command is one that has been passed down through the generations. It began with those who knew and touched Jesus in the flesh. It was passed down through the second and third generations of those who knew and touched Jesus. It has been passed down through them to us. Long ago people who did not personally know the closeness of Jesus' physical touch – his healing hand, his warm embrace, his gentle caress – began to bear witness to the power of Jesus in their lives. With the coming of the Holy Spirit, those first disciples would be reminded of what it was like to walk and talk with Jesus himself.

It is with and through that same Holy Spirit that we can be close to Jesus in spirit as we seek to know and follow his teachings, as we seek to model his love and grace in our lives, as we seek to build deep and real relationships with one another. "Seeing" and "feeling" Jesus at work in these ways, we can then share what we have seen and experienced. Sharing our stories of faith with each other builds up and encourages one another. That is certainly part of what the earliest disciples did for one another. But that was not the extent of their sharing and it is certainly not what Jesus meant when he said, *"everywhere in the world"*.

Once again, our church mission statement is this: *"to bring people to Christ, to help people grow deep in Christ"*. There is a part of this call that sends us out to



the world, out to those who do not know Jesus as Lord and Savior. We must, as followers of Jesus Christ, be people who also share our stories of faith outside of these walls and outside of this circle of friends. When we make the choice and follow through with the effort to bear witness to our faith, we will offer encouragement to the hopeless, the promise of justice to the mistreated, and healing and wholeness to the broken. We do not offer these things on our own. We offer them through the power of the Holy Spirit that dwells in each of us – that same power that Jesus promised to his disciples.



Our passage today closes with the ascension of Jesus and the promise that he will return one day. The disciples returned to their gathering place and

worshipped and prayed with this single purpose in mind: to bear witness to the

ends of the earth. We too know that one day he will return. Until then, our charge remains the same: to bear witness to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) Grow. How has your understanding of your personal call to “bear witness” grown through this passage and message from Acts 1?
- 2) Pray. Where do you find it challenging to bear witness to your faith? Spend some time in prayer seeking Holy Spirit guidance.
- 3) Study. Pick one of the disciples listed in verse thirteen. Do a little research to learn how they lived out their charge to bear witness.