

Sermon April 14, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Floyd

“You Will Be My Witnesses!”
Acts 1:1-14

SCRIPTURE: Acts 1:1-14

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

SERMON: “You Will Be My Witnesses!” The Rev. Dr. Richard Floyd

Our reading today is from the first chapter of the “Acts of the Apostles.” Acts is the second book of Luke’s two-part work. Luke’s Gospel tells the story of Jesus’s earthly life, and the Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the ministry of the church after Jesus ascends to the Father. Acts begins in the same way as Luke’s Gospel ends, with the commissioning of the disciples by Jesus and then Jesus’ ascension. Both books are in the form of a letter addressed to someone named Theophilus. And Theophilus in Greek means either “lover of God” or “beloved of God,” which pretty much covers all of us here, too, so this letter can be addressed to us.

That these two parts are separated in the canon obscures that they really belong together. Why are they separated? Well, the church wanted the four Gospels to be together. Matthew, Mark and Luke, the so-called Synoptic Gospels, share so much in common it only made sense that they

should be together. And then the Gospel of John is so strangely different that it seemed right that it should go last. So that's how we come to have the Gospel of Luke and Acts separated. They sandwiched the Gospel of John. But they really should be read as one story in two chapters.

I want to say a little bit about Luke. Luke is a very, very important person in our understanding of Christian faith. His writings comprise about one quarter of the New Testament (27 % to be exact). Without Luke we would have no Annunciation, no Mary's Magnificat, no angels and shepherds at the manger, no Prodigal Son, no Good Samaritan, no Emmaus Road, no Ascension and no Pentecost. That's quite a lot, isn't it? And that's just to name a few. I could go on and on, but I'll restrain myself!

Luke's importance is as a master storyteller, and his story about Jesus and the church is the church's story, which means it is our story. And that story offers an alternative reality to the world as we experience it in our everyday life.

As commentator Will Willimon writes: "This world in Acts is not a sober description of what is, but an evocative portrayal of what, by God's work, shall be, a poetic presentation of an alternative world to the given world, where Caesar rules and there is enmity and selfishness between men and women and there is death."

And this alternative world gives us hope that our given world does not have to be the world as it is forever. This story, of Jesus and his love, is a counter story to the one we see daily on the news. Our story, of Jesus and his love, keeps us from accepting the unacceptable and normalizing it. It keeps us from accepting what Hamas did to Israel on October 7, and what Israel is doing to Gaza as normal and acceptable. It keeps us from accepting as normal what Russia is doing to Ukraine. Our story keeps us from accepting as normal that a child in America is more likely to die from gun violence than from a car accident. We have learned to accept the unacceptable. That's the world's story. But the story of Jesus and his love keeps us from accepting the unacceptable, from accepting that some people are considered lesser and treated unjustly because of the color of their skin, or their gender, or their sexual orientation.

I could go on and on about all the events and experiences and realities of our given world that are not acceptable and should not be accepted as normal, but I don't really need to because we all live in this given world and know that world's story all too well.

But the story Luke tells that we heard today is a different story where Christ has defeated the power of death, and now reigns with God in authority, an authority greater than any Caesar or any empire, then or now.

And because Christ is risen and ascended, we too are now part of that story, that new world, that alternative world to our broken given world.

So what should we do about it? That's always the question. How do we act on this different story; how do we live out this story? Well, I always look for hints and clues, and there's a hidden clue. The very last exhortation that Jesus gives to the disciples before he ascends, his last words are that he wants us to be witnesses. "You will be my witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and the ends

of the earth.” Judea is local. Samaria is next door, and the ends of the earth are, well, everywhere.

When I was chaplain at Bangor Theological Seminary in Maine decades ago, I had a wonderful student named Jerry Fritz who became a friend of mine. After graduation he took a church in Machias, Maine. Do you know where that is? It’s way up near the Canadian border. I asked Jerry why he went way up there, and he said, “Jesus told his disciples to be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, and there were no job openings in Judea and Samaria, so I went to Machias!” He added that “Machias isn’t actually the “ends of the earth” but you can see it from there!”

So, in our Christian story Jesus sends the disciples -- and us, by extension the church in every generation -- to be his witnesses. The word “apostle” means “one who is sent.” And so, we are sent. Sent to be witnesses.

What is a witness? A witness is someone who sees or hears something and gives testimony. What is the most important quality in a witness? That their testimony is reliable; that they tell the truth! Your testimony needs to be the truth.

As some of you know, my son Andrew is a federal prosecutor. His younger sister Rebecca is a pastor. I like to call them “justice” and “mercy.” Or “Law” and “Gospel.”

Several years ago, we were at a family gathering after a funeral and somebody had gone to a fancy Italian bakery in Boston and brought a box of assorted pastries. I asked Andrew if he had any of the little cannoli. “They’re really good. I had a couple of them,” I said. “No, they were all gone when I got there,” he said. “Actually, I only had one,” I said. He said, “Were you lying to me before or are you lying to me now?” That’s my prosecutor son. But his point is that the testimony needs to be truthful. It needs to be reliable.

But there’s more than that. A witness is more than a passive observer. Anybody remember the comedian Flip Wilson? He was the first black person to have his own network TV show. He was very funny. One of his jokes was: “I’m a Jehovah’s Bystander.” “They wanted me to be a Witness, but I didn’t want to get involved!”

But a true witness does get involved. The Christian witness gives reliable and true testimony to what Jesus said and did, and who Jesus was. And it goes even farther than that. A Christian witness shares in the life of Jesus. In baptism we share in Christ’s death and his resurrection. The Christian witness is prepared to share in Jesus’ sufferings. And do you know what the Greek word we translate into English as “witness” is? It is “martyr.” You know how words change meaning? It originally just meant “witness” in Greek. But so many Christians in the early church did suffer and die for their witness that in time “martyr” took on the meaning of one who dies for their testimony, for their witness. Early Christians faced periodic persecutions, were scapegoated by Roman Emperors for political advantage. Christians were hacked to death by gladiators and fed to lions in the Roman Colosseum for spectacle sport. They were willing to die for their witness.

And Martin Luther King, Jr. references this in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” which we heard from today. His letter was to the local clergy who were not supporting his civil rights activity, and he shamed them by reminding them of who Christians had once been. He reminded them of the vitality of the early church’s witness:

“There was a time” he wrote, “when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were “a colony of heaven,” called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be “astronomically intimidated.” By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now.”

Things are different now. Someone once asked the question, “If you were arrested for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?” It’s a good question, and it raises the question of what makes these early Christian witnesses different from you and me? Did they have superpowers? Were they special people, or were they just ordinary, flawed human beings, as we are?

I submit they were just like us, “frail human beings beloved by God,” as our Pastor Brent would put it. Remember what the risen Christ said to the disheartened disciples on the road to Emmaus? Remember how they hadn’t recognized him? This was right after the crucifixion. Jesus said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! (Luke 24:25) Foolish and slow of heart to believe. That’s us. That’s the church, in all its glory, beloved by God. And yet the early Christians went to the ends of the earth to witness, to testify to who this Jesus was.

The story in Acts 1 is about regular people who followed Jesus, but often didn’t understand what that meant. They had followed Jesus, but they had abandoned him at his crucifixion. They still had questions, as we have questions. The disciples were instructed by Jesus for forty days, like Moses on the mountain. But still, they had questions. Jesus told them to go to Jerusalem and wait for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

He told them to wait and pray! They needed to prepare for what came next, for what was missing. “Wait and pray” is still good advice for the church. The church can get caught up in frenetic activity, and we can lose sight of our witness and mission. The great British theologian P. T. Forsyth refers to this as “the sin of bustle.”

So, they waited and prayed for what came next. And what came next? Well, first Jesus left them and ascended to the Father. And then they waited for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit to come upon them in power.

If you read either the Gospel of Luke or the Acts of the Apostles, you know how important the Spirit is for Luke. “The Spirit forms the bridge between the earthly Jesus and the ascended Lord.” (Childs, p. 222) And it is the Spirit that makes Jesus our contemporary and not merely a noble historical figure to be remembered. When we say that Jesus is present in our worship, present in our sacraments, present with us, it’s because of the Spirit.

And it is the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost that turns a literally dispirited band of followers into the church of Jesus Christ, which is why we sometimes celebrate Pentecost as “the birthday of the church.” Luke seemed to believe that the Spirit can’t come to the church until Jesus is ascended. The church will no longer have the earthly Jesus to turn to, but now they will have the Spirit, and for Luke the Spirit is always the spirit of the risen Christ, much like Paul’s notion of “in Christ.”

Luke is the only place in the New Testament where the Ascension is depicted as a visual event, something that people can actually see. In Luke’s cosmology “up” meant God and heaven. In our time we’ve seen pictures of the earth from the moon, so “up” may no longer work for us quite as well as it did for Luke, but the metaphor is still true, that Jesus goes to the Father from whence he came, to rule at the right hand of God, another metaphor for the place of honor. And the place from which he will return.

And who are these two men in white? Are they angels? Are they the same ones that were at the tomb on Easter? Or are they Elijah and Moses who appeared in dazzling white on the Mount of the Transfiguration? Like so many Bible texts, they don’t tell us. But Elijah was lifted up in like manner, so there are lots of resonances with the Hebrew Bible, which we need to always remember is the only Bible that Luke knew. There was no New Testament when he was writing Luke and Acts.

So, to conclude (those two words that everybody loves to hear!), what are the takeaways from today’s story?

1. We are a storied people and the story we hear in church is a better and truer story than the one the given world accepts as ultimate reality.
2. We are sent to be witnesses to the truth of the story of Jesus and his love.
3. We are called to be thermostats that transform our society and world, and not thermometers that merely gauge the ideas of popular opinion.
4. Finally, without the Spirit of the Risen Christ we can do none of these things. So, like the disciples, we wait and pray, we come together to worship, and we share the story, the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

Amen!