

"You Will Be My Witnesses"

Acts 1:1-11

It is an historical fact that 2000 years ago something happened that radically remade one of the greatest civilizations the world has ever known. In a distant outpost of the Roman empire was a tiny group of fisherman and farmers, servants and slaves - many of whom were from the Roman Empire equivalent of Eatonville - who believed this crazy notion that a man named Jesus was the Son of God, come to earth, become flesh, died for sins and rose again. That group had no political or military power, little education, no cultural currency or economic strength and yet... within two centuries they had seen millions of people in the Roman Empire swept into this movement. By the 3rd century they were the leading force in a Roman society that was crumbling, and by the early fourth century under Constantine the Great the Roman Empire was declared a Christian society because it was the Christians alone who were keeping the Empire together.

If you've ever wondered what exactly happened after the gospels, after Jesus died and rose again. If you've ever wondered why is it that we have these letters in the New Testament - Romans, Corinthians, Galatians... How it is that these Jesus followers got on after Jesus was gone. The book of Acts is the one and only account of the birth of the church.

Historians agree that the book of Acts was written by a physician who was an eyewitness to the events recorded - doctor Luke. Luke of course, is also the author of the gospel of Luke and wrote both books as a two volume history of the life of Christ and the story of the early church. As we can see in both the introduction to Luke's gospel and the book of Acts, Luke wrote to a man named Theophilus. We don't know exactly who Theophilus was, he may have been a seeker interested in the Christian faith or a new believer, neither option changes Luke's purpose for writing these volumes to him which he tells us at the beginning of his gospel.

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

Luke's intention was to ground Theophilus in the certainty of the Christian faith. This was not a myth cooked up by some group of people looking for financial or personal gain. It wasn't a cult. It was a reality grounded in solid historical fact.

The book of Acts is primarily concerned with the spread of the Christian faith through the preaching of the gospel message by the power of the Holy Spirit. And throughout the course of the book, as the gospel message is preached, initially in Jerusalem and then further and further away, The Way, as it is called, moves from primarily a Jewish sect, to gaining a significant following in the Gentile world.

But more than anything, the book of Acts is about Jesus. Look at Acts 1:1, "*In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach...*" What Luke subtly saying is that his first volume, his gospel account, was about what the incarnate Jesus **began** to do and teach and this second volume is about what the resurrected and glorified Jesus **continued** to do and teach. The book of Acts is about the continued work of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through the disciples.

Well, if you haven't clued in yet, this is not just a stand alone message. We're starting a new series this morning on the book of Acts... and we're going to plant ourselves here for more or less the next year. We're doing this not just so that we can revisit history, but so that we can encounter a living Savior who is still at work in the world today.

I think it is fitting that we end up here from where God has been taking us over the past several months. Most of you know that since the beginning of the year we've been talking a lot about the church at what it means for the church to live as a community redeemed and transformed by Jesus and on task working to accomplish God's mission in the world. We spoken numerous times how all of the Old Testament points us to God redeeming a people for his own glory, a people to whom he promises he will give new hearts to, hearts that love him and seek after him, a people that will shine his glory to the nations. Acts is the culmination of all these New Covenant promises. So I'm excited....

In Acts 1 verse 8 Jesus outlines the mission that he has for his community. And this morning this is the one verse that I want us to camp out on. Most commentators say

that this is the theme verse of Acts. We could take this verse and paint it's words it over the whole story of Acts. Let me read it again - Acts 1:8

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

I just want to lay out this morning three very simple points related to this verse:

1. Jesus give his community a mission.

We are to be a community of witnesses. Now this is the point at which most Christians start to freak out. "I don't do witness. Witnessing's not my thing. I don't have the gift of evangelism. Please don't make me walk up to someone I don't know and tell them they're going to hell, please! Or we complicate things and start thinking about all the things we need to know first. First I need to take a course on evangelism. I need to read another book. Oh, I have to memorize those lines, I always forget the lines. And as we do this we miss the simplicity of what Jesus calls all believers to.

Jesus doesn't say you will always have the perfect words. He doesn't say you will be experts. He doesn't say you will be smarter than the person you are talking to. He says you will be my witnesses. A witness is someone who has seen, heard, or knows something and then bears testimony to that.

When I think about the word witness I can't help but think of Lebron James. How many of you know who Lebron James is? Well, just a couple of years ago, in July of 2010, after his infamous "Decision" to take his talents to South Beach, a 10 story tall billboard with an image of Lebron James, arms outstretched that had dominated the downtown Cleveland skyline for 5 years, was taken down. The billboard, was part of a Nike advertising campaign surrounding Lebron with the slogan "we are all witnesses". The campaign included all different types of media and according to Nike's marketing department "paid tribute to James and the legions of fans around the world who are witnessing his greatness, power, athleticism and beautiful style of play." One of the features of the campaign was for fans to log on to the Nike website where they could access the "Witness Board" featuring shared testimony from fans about James, as well as a running tally of Witnesses as they are added. Nike also selected notable testimonials each day from a fan as the prize-winning "Witness of the Day". The campaign peaked during the 2007 NBA playoffs when all the fans in Cleveland were given T-shirts with simply the word "witness" emblazoned on the front.

Well, regardless of what you think of Nike's advertising tactics (and I don't think much of them), followers of Jesus are witnesses to one far greater, more powerful and more beautiful than LeBron James and our mission is simply to joyfully give testimony to the world around us about the one who has transformed us.

I'm reminded of the simplicity of the testimony of the blind man in John chapter 9. Do you remember him? He had been blind from birth and Jesus spat on the ground and made mud and put that mud on the man's eyes and they were opened. And it wasn't long before the Pharisees found the man and questioned him about what had happened. And do you remember the man's testimony? "One thing I know, that though I was blind now I see." I was blind but now I see. I once was serving myself, caught up in career success, in the cycle of making money and buying more toys, but Jesus transformed my life. I once was selfish and prideful as a wife and mother, manipulative and abusive to my husband and kids, but Jesus forgave me and changed me. Simple. Powerful.

John Piper defines a witness this way:

"A witness is a person that has been so touched, so powerfully and deeply moved by the reality of the Lord Jesus Christ sweeping their sins away and inhabiting their heart, that there is absolutely no sense of doubt, anymore than that there is light outside that window, or that there is a pulpit right there in front of me that Jesus is real. And you speak with the kind of confidence of one who has tasted and seen!"

It's interesting that throughout the book of Acts, what the disciples preached was not a new teaching, but a new teacher; they didn't preach a philosophy, but a person; Jesus redeemed community witnesses not only to what the living Jesus has done in our own hearts and lives, but to the historic reality of Jesus in his life, death and resurrection.

Look at Paul's own summary of what the gospel is in 1 Cor. 15:

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of who are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles." (1 Cor. 15:3-7)

What is it that caused the early disciples, these eyewitnesses of Jesus, to go through persecution, trials and even death in the face of their claims about the resurrected Christ? It was that it was true! They had really walked and talked with Jesus as he lived out a perfect life with him. They'd sat around the fire at night and seen his sinlessness. They'd seen him beaten and bloodied and led out to be crucified on a Roman cross, and they'd seen him resurrected. They'd seen the holes in his hands and feet, the spear mark in his side. It was true! Beyond a shadow of a doubt it was true!

If you are like Theophilus here this morning. You're checking Christianity out, you're not sure quite where you land on all of this. You've heard the "I was blind but now I see" stories and you think, "that's good for them, but would Christianity work for me, would it work in my case?" Don't ask that! That's not the right question. The question you need to be asking is, "Is it true?" Because only if Christianity is really true - only if there really was this person named Jesus who lived a perfect life and died a bloody death on a Roman cross and rose again to life three days later and is now seated in heaven, only if that is really true will Christianity work for you. Don't ask whether or not it will work for you, ask if it's true.

If you believe something that isn't true, it may work for a time, but it isn't going to last. Last week I heard a poll that was put out to voting Americans about a variety of so called conspiracy theories. Did you know that four percent polled believe America is run by "lizard-people"? You could believe that you were sent to earth by an alien race to get intelligence about human life and that may give you meaning and purpose, but if it's not true it's worthless!

Just as Luke did for Theophilus, I want to give you certainty that these things are true. Christianity makes historic claims about the realities of what happened 2000 years ago that no other religion in the world does. We are a God's redeemed community we are given a mission, to witness to the truth of those claims.

2. Jesus empowers his community for the mission.

I want you to put yourselves in the sandals of these disciples for just a minute. Imagine - you're gathered together with some of your best buds in the world, you're hanging with Jesus. He just rose from the dead about a month ago. He's teaching you about what it all means, and even though it doesn't make sense to you, you're loving it! Then he gives you this command, and like so many of Jesus commands, it just doesn't

quite make sense. "You're going to receive power and be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth." And then before there's even time for a little Q&A, Jesus is on a cloud headed up to heaven. "Um, Jesus could you give us a little more info please? I mean Samaria, huh? What's the end of the earth - how are we gonna get there?"

It reminds me how I felt when we took Ava home from the hospital. It's our first baby, and any of you that have kids know this feeling I'm sure - when the doctor says you're free and clear to go home. "Are you serious, do you have an owner's manual that you can give us, maybe and instruction booklet?" You're overwhelmed with the amount that you don't know.

But Jesus has told them, you will receive power. Don't worry my Holy Spirit is going to come on you and you will have the power to do this task. Do you remember what Jesus said back in John about the Holy Spirit? Think back on some of the things that Jesus said to the disciples (John 14/16):

"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

"The Helper, the Holy Spirit, will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

"I still have many things to say, but when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth."

"He will declare to you the things that are to come."

"He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Do you think some of these things are coming back to the disciples as they think on Jesus promise to clothe them with power by the Holy Spirit? And we see this drastic change in the disciples that we're going to get to in the next few weeks as we see them filled with the Holy Spirit. Suddenly these guys who after 40 days with Jesus teaching them about the kingdom still think that the kingdom is going to be the restoration of the political power of Israel, are preaching sermons that perfectly understand what God is doing in the world. How did that happen? They received power when the Holy Spirit came upon them.

This power that comes through the Holy Spirit saturates the book of Acts. Now, you might not have noticed it yet, but we are a charismatic church. We believe in the

continuation of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But there are some charismatics who get a hold of the book of Acts and they go, "Yes! Here it is. Power. Signs and Wonders. Healing. Visions. Teleportation. This is what the Christian life is about." But we're going to see throughout the book of Acts that power is never separated from witness. These two things always go together because the power is for witness, the power is always a pointer to the person of Jesus. Power is never for ourselves. It's never to draw attention to us and our high level of spirituality. I need power not so that I can go around talking about all the miracles I've seen and done but so I can share Jesus with that neighbor or coworker I'm afraid of.

That our witness depends on God's empowerment by his Spirit reminds us to of our desperate need for prayer. Josh Harris says that, *"Prayer is the posture that acknowledges that it is only by God's power that we can bear witness."* If we are not praying that God does a work through this little community at 84th and Vickery, that God works and empowers our CG's to reach out to neighbors and friends and coworkers with the good news of the gospel, if prayer is not a part of this equation we either don't really care about the mission Jesus gave us or we think that our own strategy and planning is going to get it done. We need his power.

3. Jesus gives his community a mission, Jesus empowers his community for the mission, Jesus gives his community certainty of the success of the mission.

Where do I get that from? Jesus gives commands to his disciples and then v. 9 tells us,

"After he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'"

Can you imagine that. I mean, these two angels could have given these guys a bit of a break for gawking up at the sky wondering what was going to happening. But the angels say - "Get to work. You've got a mission to be about." And what is the impetus for the fulfillment of that mission, it is the fact that one day Jesus is going to return on the clouds of heaven.

And what does the Bible tell us about that day? That when Jesus returns he will judge all his enemies and will draw his elect together from every tribe and tongue and nation. And around the throne there will be gathered those from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth. And Jesus is going to put an end to all sin and suffering, to all oppression and injustice, everything will be made new.

In the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* C.S. Lewis' has a little poem that captures the certain hope of Jesus return:

*“Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.”*
- C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*

This is the sure hope of the success of Jesus mission through his people.

Well, we aren't going to get there until next year sometime, but the book of Acts ends in Chapter 28 with Paul under house arrest in Rome. And the book ends rather abruptly. Luke has followed the progress of the gospel from it's Jewish roots in Jerusalem out the the center of the Gentile world in Rome. But as we end there is a clear sense that the story isn't finished. And I think this is Luke's intention because the story is meant to continue. The story of God's redeemed community about his mission in the world, witnessing to the risen Jesus is to continue until he returns. We are living in Acts 29.

Just as authentic Christianity transformed the Roman Empire 2000 years ago so authentic Christianity ought to transform lives and cultures and societies wherever it goes. All around us, in Summit-Waller, in Midland, in South Hill people are chasing the idols of sex, money, success, self autonomy, the American dream hoping it will work for them when we hold the greatest news on the planet. What are we doing with it?

2000 years ago God used a rag-tag group of nobodies to tell the world about a Somebody. God wants to do the same in and through us by the power of his Holy Spirit. As we meet in our community groups are we thinking this way; are we praying this way - as witnesses. Are we praying for our neighborhoods and workplaces? Are we longing that just as in the book of Acts Jesus would grow his church for his glory?