

“We Shall Be His Witnesses”

Acts 1:6-14

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After his resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days providing his disciples with tangible and visible proof that he was indeed alive. Like Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness prior to the beginning of his own ministry, these 40 days with their resurrected Lord prepared the discipleship community for the challenges they were about to face together. At the end of his time with them, Jesus told the disciples to stay in Jerusalem “to wait for the promise of the Father,” which was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit they experienced 10 days later on the day of Pentecost. The disciples, however, were anxious to know what the future would entail or, more importantly, was that future completely up to them. So, they asked Jesus, “Lord, is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” At first, Jesus didn’t give them a timeline, nor any hint of a detailed plan. Instead, he gave them a mission statement: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

If we imagine those coordinates, Jesus’ directions sounded like this: “Stay here in this Holy Place until you receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, then leave this city and go to the outlying community (Judea) — the place where you are comfortable, among familiar people and places. There, you shall be my witnesses. Then, move beyond your comfort zone and go to those people whom you have been taught to believe your worst enemies living in Samaria. There, too, you shall be my witnesses. Then, go to those people you don’t even know, strangers and foreigners who are far different from you. There, in each and every encounter you shall be my witnesses, until your testimony spreads throughout the known world.”

Sounding to them way too much like “Mission Impossible,” the disciples are stunned. All they could do was to stand there looking up at the sky, wondering what to do next, when, suddenly, two messengers appeared before them. They immediately recognize these two men who had appeared to them at the tomb on Easter morning. Rather than offering the disciples words of reassurance, they bluntly state the obvious, “Jesus has been taken from you” — words that most likely triggered another understandable bout of fear and anxiety within the disciples, causing them to retreat down the mountain and return to the upper room to wait, hoping the Holy Spirit to come and find them.

The Disciples had received their new life in Christ, but they had not yet received the new spirit to live out the reality of their new life. They were still stuck in the spirit of what was, rather than the spirit of what could be. What we know (as we will celebrate next week) — the Holy Spirit did find them, as they were all together in one place. Receiving the Spirit of new life to become apostles, they were able to witness to the resurrection power of God, in Jerusalem, in Samaria, at the seacoast, in Damascus, in Antioch, in Asia Minor, in Europe, and, finally, in Rome, and then generations after them witnessed to the resurrection power of God to the ends of the Earth.

The apostles learned what all followers of Jesus learn — that waiting for God to act is meant to be a community project. They did not scatter, each going their separate ways to await their own personal anointing of the Holy Spirit. They “were joined together” in a specific place waiting for God’s anointing on the whole community. Together, they received the gift of ascension — letting go of the life as it had been with Jesus, to which they were desperately clinging, in order that God might bless them with a new spirit for their new life in Christ.

That is the work necessary for the church of today to move forward into a new mission where the strategic plan is the same — to witness to the resurrection power of God in this Holy Place. Then, moving beyond these walls into our own community of familiar people and places; then, going wider into foreign territory, until our testimony reaches to the ends of our known world. This Eastertide, we’ve been celebrating all the wonderful ways in which we know what we believe through our study and worship. How we live what we believe through the stewardship of our time, talents, and treasure. How we share what we believe by witnessing to our own experience of the transformative power of Christ at work in us.

This morning, we are asked to consider our tangible witness to the resurrection power of God through the offering of our tithes. Being faithful of our stewardship of all of our life together means deciding how to use our spiritual, temporal, and financial resources to fulfill our particular calling. What gifts do we give to one another simply by being present in this community of faith? In our commitment to justice, where do those gifts come from and how and with whom will we share them?

Even as we continue to wrestle together with these questions next Sunday, we will again pledge ourselves and our resources to nurture one another and to participate with Christ in redeeming our world. In this waiting time between, may we pray together for a new outpouring of the Spirit for the new reality in which we are now living? To ask the Lord to reveal to us what we need to let go, that we might receive the spiritual resources we need to move forward into the future of His unfolding?