

Acts 1:1-11

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After 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. ⁴While 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; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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." ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They 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."

PREPARING FOR SOMETHING BIG

I'm not an avid sports fan. Last year I don't think I watch any sports games at all except for the Super Bowl and what I caught out of the corner of my eye while dining at Z-2. I like the Giants and the Jets, the Yankees and the Mets, but I'll only watch their games late in the season if any of them have a reasonable chance of making the playoffs, but if the teams are all performing poorly, I pay no attention to them.

Well if the disciples were some team during those 40 days after Easter, I wouldn't have paid much attention to them either. This team had not exactly performed well since the night of the last supper. A lot of them had too much wine and couldn't stay awake for Jesus, there was a lot of trash talk about how loyal they would be, but when they actually got on the field they forgot who they were; Peter actually forgot who Jesus was ("Jesus? Who's Jesus? I don't know him.") You'd think that the whole season was over for the disciples. In fact you'd think that their careers as disciples were over. But then Coach Jesus comes back from the dead and lets them know that the season is not over; in fact it has only just begun, and that they were destined for great things. How big they had no idea.

Now they may have had some reason to doubt themselves. They had performed terribly in Jerusalem. They may have been blaming themselves for Jesus' death. But now Jesus stands alive before them. Never in human history had someone so definitively dead come back to life. Still the disciples' response is underwhelming; "Uh, Lord, is this the time you're gonna be restoring the kingdom of Israel?" That's like asking Evander Holyfield, "Do you think you'll make for two rounds with Mitt Romney?" I mean, they are asking the Son of God if he plans to set up his kingdom in Israel; they have no clue what Jesus is capable of, or more importantly, what *they* are capable of.

So Jesus tells them, "It's not for you to know, but *you* will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and *you* will be my witnesses, not only in Jerusalem, not only in Judea, not only in Samaria, but the ends of the earth." There are two simple points I'd like to make from today's lesson. The first is that **JESUS CHRIST HAS EMPOWERED US**, and second that we are to be **HIS WITNESSES**. These two distinct points depend on one another; **WE ARE EMPOWERED BUT ONLY EMPOWERED THROUGH HIM**, and we must keep them forever connected or we will fail in our ministry. Let me explain.

First, Jesus Christ has empowered us. He tells us that YOU will be my witnesses, and not just in your church or on your block or in your office, but to the ends of the earth. The disciples question, "Lord, is this the time **you** will restore the Kingdom of Israel," is the wrong question for two reasons: first it limits the scope of the mission to Israel when Jesus has the whole world in mind. Second, it relieves us of any responsibility as if Jesus just came to do every for us. "Lord, when are YOU going to establish your kingdom? I want to make sure I have good seats to see this." Jesus says, "Guess what? It's not *me* but *you* who are going to make it happen, and it's going to be a whole lot more than you imagine." Now I can think of two reasons why the disciples would not want to be directly involved in bringing Christ's kingdom into this world. First, they didn't have much confidence in themselves. They had learned the limits of their commitment when Jesus was arrested. When arrest and execution seemed like the probable outcome of their mission, they abandoned that mission. The second reason that they were reluctant to take on the task was that, knowing what Jesus had gone through, they were afraid of what the personal cost might be. We have the same issue; we look at discipleship and, let's face it we don't want to carry crosses much bigger than those we wear around our necks. We would rather Jesus carry it for us, and we would rather have Jesus establish his kingdom around us, ridding us of all those pesky folks who don't seem to have our best interest at heart. We want Jesus to be someone like King David, who protects us from all those nasty Philistines, or radicals or misfits or foreigners or you fill in the blank. Instead Jesus says that you are going to go out not to restore anything (because every earthly kingdom that has ever existed has failed live up to God's standards) but to establish something new, something perfect, and something global. Jesus empowers us to accomplish this mission – that is the first point.

The second point is that we are empowered through JESUS CHRIST. That's the only way that God's kingdom will be established on earth, is through Jesus Christ. Why? Because unless Christ is in charge, the mission will fail. We have a great capacity to diminish and distort God's will. Let me offer an example. Some folks naively assert that we can build a world where love rules rather than God. People have made love their God, but then they define what love is in their own terms. I hear that word "love" thrown around so carelessly, even cruelly. Many a woman is abused by a man who declares innocently, "I love you." Many a person is seduced into serving another person with the words, "I love you." We say that the world needs more love, and then tell ourselves that OUR love is the standard. We have turned love into a God, which is, I dare say, idolatry. The Apostle John writes that God is love; he doesn't say that love is God, and the reason that he does not say "Love is God" is because he knows our propensity to diminish the definition of love just as we have a propensity to diminish the definition of God

– that's right, we do that, too. We've all learned the names of those ancient Greek and Roman gods – they're included in our calendar and in the names of constellations. There were gods of all sorts of things – gods of trees and fruits and wine and mountains and lightning, and the sun and the moon, and war and peace, and people believed in them. Why not? People had created them! Is there anyone today who seriously worships Apollo or Ares? And just as people created these gods, they created the notion that they were related to these gods; emperors and kings began to think that they were gods! And now so many "open-minded" people like to think that what's left nowadays in all the major world religions is all the "good" gods, the ones who are all about "love," and now we're back where we started from equating "God" with "love" but love on our own terms.

Which is why Jesus Christ is so important. It's why he told his disciples that they will be HIS witnesses, because Jesus Christ declares himself to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus Christ embodies God's love. He is the standard for love. Do you want to know what the perfect expression of love is? It's not dying for a friend; you have go further. It's dying for an enemy. No, it's more than that; it's dying slowly and painfully for an enemy, or rather it's dying slowly and painfully at the hands of your enemy, and let's throw in a bit of mocking and spitting and humiliation, but we're still not there. It's dying slowly and painfully at the hands of this mocking, spitting enemy who humiliates you, and praying to God that this enemy is forgiven. But wait; there's more. It's dying slowly and painfully at the hands of your mocking

and spitting enemy who humiliates you, and praying to God that this enemy is forgiven, and then coming back from death to declare to your enemy that he is indeed forgiven. Okay, one more step; love is dying slowly and painfully at the hands of your enemy who mocks, spits at, and humiliates you, praying for that enemy's forgiveness, and coming back from death to declare to your enemy that he is forgiven and therefore has eternal life with God! Who embodies such love? JESUS!

Now today we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus Christ, the day that Jesus went up into heaven. That doesn't sound like much reason to celebrate, because we might feel a bit scared without his presence. The good news is that he told his disciples that they wouldn't have to wait long before they were baptized in the Holy Spirit – that would happen the following week, but they had to have church council meeting before to select a replacement for Judas – apparently their Book of Discipline stated that they must have 12 disciples. The good news is that Jesus was true to his word and sent the Holy Spirit. The bad news is that there are many people inside and outside the church who are still waiting to receive it. What do I mean? I mean that, like the disciples during that long week between Ascension Day and Pentecost, they didn't have what it took to witness to Jesus Christ. We don't know what might have been going through the disciples' minds during that week, but I can guess what goes through the minds of many a good parishioner when they are told to go out and bear witness to Jesus Christ. Visions of fanatics come into their heads (they don't call them Jesus *freaks* for nothing). They are afraid that being too bold about their religion will offend others, that bearing witness to Jesus Christ is offensive to those who don't share their faith, and before you know it they have stopped professing faith in Jesus Christ and put their faith in something abstract and tangible like "love," and *voila*; they're no longer Christians. You know, such doubts may have actually been what the disciples *were* experiencing in that time between the ascension and Pentecost; Matthew records that even seeing the resurrected Christ, some of the disciples doubted, and of course we all know about Doubting Thomas. Perhaps it would take several days for everything to sink in, before the disciples actually gained a level of assurance that Jesus was truly the Son of God and Savior of the World.

And perhaps many of you, too, are waiting for that epiphany, for that "aha" moment when you come to a level of faith where bearing witness to Jesus is something that you do naturally and joyfully. Girls, keep going to church. Your minds are young, and there is a lot you have to learn about Jesus and about the world. And one day, I'm sure, you will come to believe so strongly in Jesus as God's son that you will be happier than you can imagine now and you will want to share Jesus Christ with everyone you meet.

For everyone else, I pray that, if you have not yet come to the conclusion that Jesus is the Savior of the World, and you're not inspired to share that with the world (by the way, the word 'inspired' means filled with the spirit), you may be in that time of waiting, but I pray that you would pray for God's Spirit to "inspire" you, so that you would bear witness to Jesus Christ, in thought, in word, and in deed.

And don't be afraid. The team that Jesus coached was not a team of superstars, and they didn't have a very good record early in the season; if I gambled, I wouldn't have bet on them. But with God, all things are possible. If you are struggling with your faith, I pray that this Pentecost will be a day that you are empowered by faith, empowered with the Holy Spirit to declare Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord in Staten Island, in New York State, in New Jersey, and to the ends of the earth.