

POWER TO WITNESS

Acts 1:6-14
John 17:1-11

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TEXT: Acts 1:8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in isn all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
PURPOSE: To challenge us to make faithful use of the Holy Spirit power we have received to be Christ’s witnesses in our time and place.

The days of the first Easter season were coming to a close. Of course, those earliest followers of Jesus didn’t know they were in an Easter season, since there wasn’t yet a church, which organized our worship life into seasons much later on in our history. Those earliest followers were in a season of celebrating that Jesus had come back to them. He had suffered, died, and been buried, but that had not been the end of the story. He had been raised from death. As their resurrected Lord and Savior, he had continued to walk with them, and talk with them, and tell them they were his own.

I would guess that during those extraordinary days, Jesus’ disciples were beginning to believe that he would be with them forever. After all, he had beaten death. What else could separate him from them? But tradition holds that the day described in the passage we heard from the book of Acts was the fortieth day after his resurrection. That ought to have tipped them off, since the Bible loves periods of forty days. It rained for forty days in the time of Noah. Moses spent forty days on the holy mountain with God. The Israelites spent forty years wandering in the wilderness before they crossed over into the promised land. Jesus spent forty days being tempted in the wilderness. Maybe that was why, after forty days, the disciples asked Jesus if the time had come to restore the kingdom to Israel. “Let’s go!” they pressed him. “This is the time! Let’s give Rome the boot, and get this country back to the great, God-fearing country it was, with you, the promised and now risen Messiah, in full control!”

They still didn’t get it. Three years of receiving his teaching, and witnessing his power to heal, hadn’t made his way clear to them. His obedience unto death, his love made perfect in suffering, hadn’t made his way clear to them. Even his awesome resurrection hadn’t made his way clear to them. After all this, they still couldn’t grasp the fullness of his kingdom’s coming. So one more time, Jesus corrected them. Then as now, Jesus’ followers have no inside information

on the timing of events in the drama of salvation. But on that occasion, the correction carried a promise and a commission. “You will receive power,” he promised them, “Holy Spirit power.” “That power will enable you to be my witnesses in the world.” And those were his last words to them: here’s your job, and here’s your equipment. With that, he was taken up into heaven, gathered in a cloud like the cloud that covered the mountain where Moses met with God.

Now what? After forty days of risen presence, now what? After the dazzling spectacle of what we call “the Ascension,” now what? First, the two white-robed men who met the women at the empty tomb appeared out of nowhere and assured the disciples that Jesus was coming back. Then, the disciples went back to Jerusalem, back to the same upstairs room where Jesus had broken bread with them the night before his death. With the women who were part of that inner circle, they did what Christians have done from those days down to these days: they held a meeting. But their meeting had no reading of minutes from their last meeting, no financial report, no discussion of programs and projects. Although, if you continue reading in the first chapter of Acts, you will discover that there was a nominating process to fill the position among the twelve that the betrayer Judas had held.

Aside from this, the text recalls that this small band was “constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” Not knowing what was about to happen, they prayed. Not sure what it would be like to receive Holy Spirit power, they prayed. Not able to imagine what being witnesses of Jesus to the ends of the earth would involve, they prayed. They prayed as if their lives depended on it, and indeed they did. After all, the Greek word for “witness” is “martyr.”

Those first followers were witnesses in the way we understand witnessing. They had seen Jesus perform miracles of healing. They had broken bread with him and known personally the wonder of his presence. They had watched, even if from a frightened distance, his cruel death. They had examined the empty tomb and known beyond a doubt that his had been raised from death. They saw him taken up into heaven, so they knew why he no longer walked and talked with them as he had. Once they received the Holy Spirit on the Jewish holiday of Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday, they took up the task of witnessing. They told what they had seen with their own eyes. Their witness attracted people, and

the Church of Jesus Christ spread like yeast in the dough of the Roman empire.

This is a great story, except that it's not the end of the story. The work of witnessing, and the Holy Spirit power needed to continue the witnessing, has been passed on through the church. So now, we have the Spirit, and we are the witnesses. But wait! We didn't see his healings. We haven't walked with him, broken bread with him. We weren't there when they crucified our Lord. We didn't explore the empty tomb, or receive two white-robed visitors. We didn't encounter him in his resurrected being, and we certainly didn't see him taken up into heaven in a cloud. How can we be witnesses? The answer is, by virtue of the power of the Holy Spirit, which continues to come down on Christ's Church. The Holy Spirit, by which the church is the Church of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit, by which Christ is revealed to us, Christ crucified, dead and buried, Christ raised from death, Christ ascended into heaven, now sitting at God's right hand, which means, Christ fully in charge of the world he still loves.

Think of it. The Spirit allows us to see, whenever anyone suffers unjustly, whenever anyone experiences brutality by people seeking to maintain their hold on power, that Christ is again being crucified. In the suffering of hundreds of thousands in Darfur, in the displacement of millions in Iraq, in the trauma our soldiers bring home from our wars, in the slow death of people on the fringes of our own affluent society, the Spirit shows us Christ crucified again and again. *Do I have a witness?*

The Spirit allows us to see, whenever hope overcomes despair, whenever courageous trust in God prevails over fear and cynicism, wherever self-forgetting love assures persons of their incomparable worth, that Christ is again victorious over death. In the joy of people who find acceptance and belonging in Christ's Church, in the power of recovery from addictions, in the miracle of forgiveness offered and accepted, and relationships renewed, the Spirit shows us Christ victorious over the powers of sin and death. *Do I have a witness?*

The Spirit allows us to see, whenever sovereign grace trumps brute power, whenever tyrants fall and bullies lose their steam, whenever humility overcomes arrogance and servant living melts bitterness and despair, that Christ truly is ascended into heaven, sitting at God's right hand, judging the hearts of every

person, but also reconciling the world to God. In the courage of our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe, in the power of gentle love made real in those who feed the hungry and visit the sick and welcome the stranger in the name of Jesus, in the vision of God's realm firmly established on earth as it is in heaven that carries us into itself, the Spirit lets us see the consequences of Christ ascended into heaven, and slowly but surely establishing his sovereignty over all that is. *Do I have a witness?*

And the Spirit allows us to see, whenever this table is set before us, and we come together as Christ's friends, forgiven and forgiving, indeed, whenever two are three are gathered in his name, be it for morning prayer or evening meeting or visiting with each other in times of need, that the same Jesus who broke bread with his Galilean friends makes himself present to us, and lets us witness to his life in and for the world. *Do I have a witness?*

Many years after the first disciples received the Holy Spirit and began their work of witnessing, the apostle named Paul wrote a letter to his young friend Timothy. In it, he first gave thanks for the faith Timothy received from those who had paved the way for him, as we gave thanks today for the new members of our fifty year club, who are part of the cloud of witnesses who have passed the torch of this ministry on to us. But then, Paul urged Timothy to rekindle the gift of God that he had received, and reminded him that God had not given us "a spirit of timidity, but rather, the Spirit of power, and love, and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:7) That's the nature of the Spirit that Jesus promised his followers would receive. That's the Spirit that lets us see Christ crucified, raised, and ascended, and present. That's the Spirit that powers our witnessing in word and in deed to the one who has come to us, who shares our life, who still conquers sin and death, and who will not rest until all creation is reconciled with God, its creator.

That Spirit intends to overtake our life together. That Spirit means to make us witnesses equal to the awesome task of introducing this world, our world, with all its aimlessness and insanity, all its vanity and deceit, to its true Savior, to the one whose love makes all things new. We may worry that we don't have what we need to be the faithful people we want to be. We may fret that we have feet of clay, and hearts of stone, and calendars too full of commitments for us to witnesses to Christ. We may wonder how we as a church can sustain our work of

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witnessing when we see all the open positions on our boards and the daunting deficit in our budget. But the truth is, we have what we need to be the Church Christ calls us to be. We have power to witness, because we have received the Holy Spirit. That's all Christ said his first followers needed to be his church. May we join them in prayer that we will know what to do with what he gives.