

You Shall Be My Witnesses!

Acts 1:1-14

May 6, 2001

“It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” Here is the heart of the matter: “You shall be my witnesses.” Here is Luke’s version of the Great Commission: “You shall be my witnesses.” Here is the starting point for all the mighty works the disciples did after this: “You shall be my witnesses.” Here is what Jesus says to us: “You shall be my witnesses...to the end of the earth.”

How can Jesus say this? What is the basis for this mission? What is the foundation upon which this assignment rests? Is not this the crucified one? Was not he nailed to the cross outside Jerusalem? Is not this the one who was dead and buried? The reason that Jesus can say this to the disciples is that he has been raised from the dead, resurrected to a new life, made alive again in vindication of his sacrifice, and in victory over the powers of sin, death, and evil. The resurrection is the foundation of the gospel. This is the basis of the entire Christian faith. This is the heart of the truth. Without the resurrection, the whole thing falls apart, and we have nothing at all. But with the resurrection, we have everything: faith, hope, love, and life. Yes, it was “after his passion,” after his horrible suffering, after his terrible death that Jesus “presented himself alive” to his disciples. That is the whole point. He was alive again. This was no vision. This was no imagination. This was no feeble memory. This was not something the disciples made up to keep their cushy new positions. This was an action initiated and taken by the living Lord Jesus Christ presenting “himself alive” to his disciples. He was not presenting an idea. He was not presenting an ideal. He was not giving a lesson. He was not sharing an opinion or some great principle. Jesus “presented himself alive” to his disciples. He came to them, ate with them, talked with them, stayed with them, encouraged them, and commissioned them. He offered many proofs of the truth and reality of his life during a series of appearances during forty days, nearly a month and a half. He was alive, after his death. He was alive again. A new reality has been unleashed on the earth. The yearning of the ages has been fulfilled. God’s power is greater than the power of death. Death is not the end of everything. Evil has been defeated. Sin has been forgiven. The word is out. The good news has begun to spread. So when Luke writes, “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do

and teach,” we are made ready for everything else that Jesus will continue to do and teach, then and now, in them and in us, for ever and ever.

This is the basis of the commission, of the Christian faith, and of human life: Jesus Christ, who was crucified, dead, and buried, has been raised again from the dead. Jesus presented himself in person, alive and well, to his disciples. And still, in the face of all of this, “when they had come together,” the best the disciples could come up with was, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Had they missed the point entirely? Jesus was not an earthly king. His kingdom was not of this world. His concern was not to free Israel from Rome or reestablish Israel as a nation. Jesus must have been pulling his hair out by now, if he had any left. He launched into a rebuke: “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.” That continues to be the case for us. God will do what God will do in God’s good time. It does not depend upon us, and we are not in on that timetable. Even more to the point here, we are dealing with God’s plans for God’s world. The concern is not the kingdom of Israel. The reality at hand is the kingdom of God. The task is not the preservation of Israel. The task is the proclamation of the gospel to all the world.

Thus does Jesus immediately direct their attention away from what is not theirs to know to what is theirs to do: “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” This is not something for which they volunteered; “he had chosen” them. This is not something to which they aspired; so far as we know, their witness led them into being martyrs for Christ, and they paid for their witness with their lives. This is not something of which they were capable by any natural strength or intelligence or by any human training. Instead, Jesus “he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father.” And he told them, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” Just as the initiative had been with God, so the continuing reality and power of the witness depended upon God. It has been suggested that this verse provides a table of contents for the book of Acts: “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” And while that is true, as far as it goes, it also tells us again that the story is not over, the work is not done, the witness is not complete, and we are still called today to spread the word about Jesus Christ. The whole thing is much larger than the disciples ever dreamed.

No sooner had the commission been given than Jesus Christ was lifted up out of the sight of the disciples. Whatever else this means, it means that the risen Lord Jesus Christ is with God the Father in heaven, ruling the universe. We have a mediator in heaven. All other claims to lordship over us are destroyed. Angels came

to reassure them that it was pointless to wonder about when Jesus would return. All such speculation is cut off.

So, what did the disciples do? Surprisingly enough, they did as they were told! They went back to Jerusalem, they went to the upper room, and they prayed with a single heart and mind. That is a miracle, in and of itself. When else has the church ever been that united? They waited, and they prayed. Christ's teachings were complete. The disciples knew all the right words. But it was not within their power to preach. It was not within their strength to witness. The work of the church did not depend upon their capabilities, their initiatives, or their plans. So they waited, and they prayed. Still today it is not possible to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ without the help of the Holy Spirit. It is not possible to bear witness to Jesus Christ, without the help of the Holy Spirit. It is not possible to tell of the truth and reality of his resurrection, without the help of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it is not possible to believe the gospel, without the help of the Holy Spirit. So the very fact that we have believed the gospel, the very fact that we have heard the good news preached, the very fact that the apostles did become witnesses and that their words have come down to us through the centuries shows that they waited and prayed and received the Holy Spirit.

Where does this leave us today? Like the first disciples, we live after the passion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Like the first disciples, we live before the second coming of Jesus Christ. Unlike the disciples in today's reading, we live after Pentecost, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, the fulfillment of the promise, the gift of power. That has already happened. The power of their witness, the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, has been unleashed on the world. We are its recipients. We are its beneficiaries. We would not be here otherwise. And so it is that now we are drawn into the story, into the truth, into the new reality. We who have heard the name are to name the name. We who have been forgiven are to forgive. We who have heard the witness are to become witnesses. We are to tell the truth about Jesus Christ. We are to share the good news about his resurrection. Christ is alive! Everything has changed.

Jesus said to them, and so to us, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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