

## **“Action”**

Today our passage is from the first chapter of Acts. Jesus ascends into heaven and leaves the apostles on earth. The ascension was necessary to draw a line between the work of the risen Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will continue to do Jesus’ work on earth. Jesus said In Matthew, “Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world (Matt. 28:20). His work would continue even though he was not here through the Acts of the Apostles.

But there is a big question if these Apostles can in fact do the work of Jesus. Jesus has given them a monumental task. He tells them that they will be witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria and to the farthest ends of the earth. They would do this without\cars, airplanes, smartphones, or the internet.

As Christians we face the same challenge today. Can we continue to take the witness of Jesus Christ into the world? We hear and read that the Church has lost influence. We are aware of the divisions in the body of Christ. What was taught to those early Apostles is a lesson for us today.

We need to get some perspective on the writer of Acts, who was Luke. Luke was a physician. He also wrote the Gospel of Luke. He is the only Gentile writer in the whole Bible. He was an historian. He personally knew the Apostle Paul. He was close to the history he wrote. For the first 15 chapters of Acts, Luke was able

to go to firsthand sources and get information. For chapters 16 to 28 of the book, Luke had firsthand knowledge of what he wrote. He was a helper of Paul and was a companion of Paul during his last imprisonment. He had a chance to spend time with Paul and talk to him while he awaited trial. What an opportunity to get stories from Paul!

Luke's main aim in Acts is show the expansion of Christianity, how a small sect in Palestine eventually spread all over the Roman Empire and made its way to Rome in thirty years. He wants to show that Christianity was a universal religion for all people of every country. It was not to be confined to the Jewish faith alone. He would write about preaching to other nations. It was to be a religion without bounds.

But how would this small band of people expand this faith like they did? The church was empowered to do so by the Holy Spirit. In this first chapter of Acts Jesus tells the apostles to wait on the Holy Spirit, the promise from God who will be with them to give them the power they will need. We learned about the functions of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete in last week's discussion from the Gospel of John. The Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus. The Holy Spirit fills the Apostles with courage and with strength. Today the Holy Spirit fills you with the power to do the mission work of Christ. And let us realize that

the Christianity shaped by Acts is neither quiet nor passive. The mission is aggressive, assertive, challenging and countercultural in calling upon everyone everywhere to repent and turn to Jesus in faith.

As a lesson to us, Jesus did more than just provide the Holy Spirit. He had a forty day period of preparation of his disciples. They received instruction in ministry. The number forty probably relates to other forty day periods in the Bible, such as the time Jesus fasted in the desert and was tempted by Satan. Keep in mind that the Holy Spirit does not work in an intellectual vacuum. It is important that we today receive as much biblical instruction as we can. Impoverishment of theological understanding in the church diminishes the community's influence in the surrounding culture. We need to be prepared when we take our witness into the world. And reading will also bring physical benefits. A study by Yale University researchers several years ago showed a significant linkage between book reading and longevity. Reading books leads to cognitive benefits that positively impact greater survival rates. The research found that book readers averaged a two-year longer life span than those who did not read at all.

We read that "He presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs." The gospel that is preached and embodied in life is not based on fictions or theological abstractions but is predicated on hard evidence that Jesus appeared

to people as really alive after the resurrection. He ate with them, had communion with them, and taught them scripture. The lesson to us is that our witness be personal and based on what has actually happened to us. As the commentator William Barclay writes, a witness is one who says I know this is true. Barclay also emphasizes that the actions, not the words, of a witness are so much more effective to spread the message.

We read that Jesus “spoke to them about the Kingdom of God.” The Jews labored under a great disadvantage. When they heard the term “Kingdom of God,” they thought, because they were the chosen people, Jesus was going to help them set up another political kingdom on earth. They wanted another great kingdom like that under King David and King Solomon.

Although Jesus does not deny the Jews’ role in the function of taking the message of Christ into the world (Israel is called a light to the nations), his message is that Gentiles can also share in the blessings of salvation. When we say the Lord’s Prayer, by the Kingdom of God Jesus meant a society upon Earth where God’s will is as perfectly done as it is in heaven. It is a kingdom founded on love and not power.

We must also appreciate that when the Apostles waited for the Holy Spirit, they waited as a community. Waiting with others is an act of solidarity. We should

never try to go it alone in our witness. It must be in community. The church of Acts is a missionary community called together by God's messiah and sent out into the world by the power of God's spirit to interpret the importance of Jesus' resurrection for all people everywhere.

“They all joined together constantly in prayer.” The Apostles did not just sit around and passively wait for the Holy Spirit. They engaged in prayer. While we are doing our work for Jesus, we need to remain constantly in prayer. Praying together demonstrated the importance of the Apostles' spiritual unity in accomplishing their mission for Christ. When the Apostles returned to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension, they could have been downtrodden and depressed. But they were not. They returned with great joy. They knew through Jesus' teachings, the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and their praying together as a community that he would be with them forever.

We also receive a promise that Jesus will return again. As William Barclay writes, to speculate on when it will happen and how it will happen is foolish. The essential teaching of the second coming is that God has a plan for man and the world. History is not a haphazard conglomeration of chance events that is going nowhere. We strive for the coming of the day when Christ will return and we need to be ready for it when it comes.

Acts shows that show much was accomplished by the early church. The church has done many things over the last two thousand years. The various resources of our canonical heritage teach us that to be the church we should seek a compliment of witnesses. Thus the witnesses of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany and that of Martin Luther King, Jr. in a racially divided United States speak to the importance and power of Jesus' resurrection in the modern life. There are numerous issues today in which we can be witnesses to how Jesus' resurrection applies. We need to take action and be those witnesses.

Being a witness means we act with deeds, not just words. In the Greek, the same word is used for *witness* as it is for *martyr*. To be a witness means to be loyal no matter what the cost. In closing, William Barclay shares the following story about what is real witness:

*When H. M. Stanley had discovered David Livingstone in Central Africa, and when he had spent some time with him, he said, "If I had been with him any longer, I would have been compelled to be a Christian and he never spoke to me about it at all." The sheer weight of the witness of the man's life was irresistible.*