

Scripture:

Acts 1:1-11

Luke 24:44-53

“You will be my witnesses.”

Today is Ascension Sunday.

Ascension Sunday --- the day Jesus returns to being seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty as the Apostle’s Creed reminds us.

And Ascension Sunday marks a significant shift in the church year.

The 40 days of the season of Easter are over ----- and we are about to come to Pentecost next week and then what is known as ordinary time after that.

Easter --- Ascension ---- Pentecost --- and then almost half of the church year --- ordinary time ----- taking us to Christ the King Sunday and then Advent.

Ascension Sunday signals the shift from Easter to Pentecost.

Jesus’ 40 days of post resurrection appearances end at Ascension ---- and shortly thereafter He sends the Holy Spirit in a special way at Pentecost.

Ascension signals a shift from the literal corporeal presence of Christ ---- to the presence and power and influence of the Holy Spirit.

The ministry and witness that Christ initiated is carried on in and through the Spirit that He breathes and shares.

And sometimes the line between the work of the Holy Spirit and that of the Risen Christ is difficult to distinguish --- and so it should be --- because in truth they are virtually one and the same.

Whether something ----- some witness or ministry is done in the name of or through the power and influence of the Holy Spirit --- or in the name of and through the power and influence of the Risen One --- matters very little -----

because they are both truly one and the same ----- they are both expressions of ---- Father --- Son --- and Holy Spirit.

But of course --- the return of Jesus to God's right hand is necessary.

And it's necessary because the post resurrection appearances of Christ can't just peter out quietly ---- there has to be a line --- a time when they definitively come to an end.

A time that signals the end of Christ's time here on earth ---- so as to enable and allow us to prepare for the day of the second coming.

Verse 11 from the book of Acts includes ---- "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

"This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." ---- in other words ----- just as He left --- so will He return.

Suddenly --- and in accordance with God's Will.

And just to make it clear that the work of Christ is not about standing around calculating and guessing when this return might be Jesus says ----- in verse 7 from the book of Acts today ----- "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."

We are not ----- as Disciples of Christ --- to be concerned or focused on when Christ will return --- instead we are to focus on witnessing until that day finally comes.

"It is not for you to know the times or the dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

You can't make it any clearer than this.

Don't waste your time trying to figure out when I will return --- Jesus says.

Instead focus on being my witnesses --- I will no longer be here in bodily form to witness ---- so I need you to do it for me.

And don't worry ----- don't get confused ---- don't feel as though you need to rely on your self and your own abilities ----- I will send the Spirit ---- the Holy Spirit of God ----- just as I did on Isaiah ----- and so many others before you --- it will lead and guide you.

And just to be clear --- start by witnessing at home in Jerusalem ---- and then in Judea ---- and then in Samaria --- and then carry on to all the ends of the earth.

For us this would read --- start in Whitby ---- or wherever it is we live --- Oshawa --- Ajax ---- Pickering --- Courtice --- and so on.

Then think of Durham region and Ontario in general --- Judea.

Then Canada ----- Samaria ----- and indeed the whole world ----- all the ends of the earth.

Ascension Sunday signals a shift from Christ being here --- walking the earth as we now do --- and the space in between His second and final return.

Ascension Sunday signals a shift from Christ being the chief witness to the way God intends us to live and relate ----- and now us being the chief witnesses to this way.

“And you will be my witnesses” ----- Jesus says to His disciples just before He leaves them --- these are His very last words to His Disciples.

I remember one Friday morning when I lived in our apartment in Guelph before Kate and I bought our first home ----- I was home writing the sermon --- and the doorbell rang ----- reluctantly I answered it --- because often when I'm preparing worship materials I won't answer the door or the phone.

But for reasons that soon became apparent I did answer the door on this day.

So I get the door and there are 2 people in suits ready to share their version of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with me --- from a perspective that I soon found out wasn't what I would consider within the Christian tradition.

And they begin with a rather contrived and one sided out pouring of scripture verses ----- quotations ---- and opinions.

After a few minutes I'd had enough --- and so I pleasantly interrupted them and asked them if they were interested in knowing what I was doing.

“Guess what I was doing when you called.” ---- I said.

Of course they both looked rather dumbfounded because they really preferred for this to be a one way conversation ----- they talk I listen --- they open my eyes to the truth that they possess --- without any give and take ---- or back and forth.

So I said to them --- “just now when you rang the doorbell ---- I was writing my sermon for Sunday worship ---- I went on to tell them that I was an ordained minister with the Presbyterian Church in Canada and part of my calling is to lead worship each week including preaching a sermon.”

I'm not really sure how much of this they took in --- because they basically leapt back into their diatribe.

So I interrupted them again and said ----- “look I really want to get back to my sermon --- so ----- in one sentence can you please tell me what you think is the most important thing you can share with me about the Bible as you see it.”

Without hesitation --- and also --- well beyond just one sentence.

They shared with me how they were able to determine when and why it was then that they thought Jesus was about to return.

When and why they thought Jesus was about to return --- and in that order.

My response wasn't to quote scripture --- today's reading from Acts ---- “it is not for you to know the times or the date the Father has set by his own authority.” ----- might have been a good way to respond --- but I didn't.

What I did say was ----- “Wow”.

“Wow ----- that is the most important thing in the whole of the Bible --- which of course it isn’t even in the Bible --- but Wow that’s the most important thing you could share with me about Jesus --- that you know precisely when and why He will return.”

And I went on to say ---- what you just shared ---- and the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that I have come to know are so radically different that I’m not even sure we have any common ground to share.

Would you like to know what I think is the most profound truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in one sentence --- and truly only just one sentence.

And the answer I got wasn’t really wasn’t an answer at all.

Because they simply returned to quoting scripture that they believed supported their concern for sharing how they could determine when Jesus would return and why and how they could set that date as the definitive day of His return.

We can get all caught up in varying so called gospel priorities -----
 ----- determining when Christ will return
 ----- trying to figure out if the miracles ever really happened
 ----- trying to intellectually grasp things like the virgin birth or resurrection
 ----- trying to explain how creation happened and so on

But this isn’t what we are called to do ----- we are called to witness to Jesus Christ in word and in deed.

Not draw up time lines and graphs.

Or try to prove this or understand that.

We’re not called to draw up ----- or live by our own agendas.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; **and you will be my witnesses** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And receiving the power of the Holy Spirit is not just a one time event.

And being a witness to the way and truth and light of Christ is not just a one time event.

Both of these are day to day ----- on going ----- as God so provides and reveals ---- experiences.

There is no way that the disciples could witness in Jerusalem ----- in all Judea ----- in Samaria ----- and to all the ends of the earth --- in a single day.

It will be the work of their lifetime ---- and then some ---- to ever even approximate this.

The Holy Spirit wasn't just given on one day at one time and never again ---- it is a lifetime of experiences in the Spirit of God that we are invited into.

Yes next week at Pentecost there will be a special doling out of the Spirit in a special way.

But the Holy Spirit didn't just arrive for the first time at Pentecost.

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me” ----- Isaiah 61.

“And Jesus again said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” ----- John 20 verses 21 and 22.

And there are countless other examples of the Holy Spirit outside of just the one day of Pentecost that we hear about in the book of Acts chapter 2 --- next weeks reading.

There is:
Job 27:2
Isaiah 32:15

Genesis 1:2
 Micah 3:8
 Psalm 51
 Ezekiel 36:25-27
 Isaiah 11:2
 Exodus 31:3
 John 16:7-15
 Mark 1:10
 John 14:15-17
 John 15:26

And so on.

The gift and blessing and power and influence of the Holy Spirit is not just a one time ----- only on Pentecost or any other single day for that matter event.

We look at this in more depth next week at Pentecost ---- when the Holy Spirit manifests itself in a rather dramatic and memorable fashion.

As a bit of a teaser for next week I'll share Walter Brueggemann's famous quote on the Holy Spirit.

He says ----- "Holy Spirit" talk among us is tricky, because there are so many freakish suggestions. Taken most simply, Holy Spirit refers to the intruding, invasive, energizing power from God that comes like the wind to blow us beyond ourselves, to take actions, to dare dreams, to run risks that in our accustomed powerlessness are well beyond us."

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More on this next Sunday as we enjoy our worship outdoors ---- but for today this quote reminds us that whenever we come to a text ----- whenever we are blessed with a moment or experience in life that includes the great gift of the Holy Spirit it is often a gift from God that pushes us beyond just ourselves and our limited capabilities and into a greater and larger truth.

Jesus reminds His disciples to today in the book of Acts ----- just as He is about to leave them ----- “and you will be my witnesses.”

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We too --- just like His very first Disciples ---- are to be His witnesses.

And we are to witness in His name and in the power of the Holy Spirit ----- and not just our own abilities or levels of comfort and confidence.

We are to be witnesses far beyond what we could ever accomplish on our own --- because we are to be His witnesses in the power of the Spirit.

In the Holy Spirit of God --- in the power and influence of our Risen Lord.

And that’s precisely part of what we are doing today in our worship ---- and with what we have set before us ----- Communion ----- witnessing to the way of Christ.

The book of Acts tells the story of the Church --- of the people ----- that carry on the life and witness and ministry of Jesus Christ.

And the book of Acts shows us that the Church of Christ --- that the witnesses and Disciples of Christ --- accomplish what they accomplish only because of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 4 from the book of Acts today ---- “.... While he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, **but wait for the gift** my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.””

“....wait for the gift....”

“Wait for the gift” ----- of the Holy Spirit ----- Jesus said.

It would have been understandable had the disciples taken off right away and began witnessing to the Risen Lord.

But Jesus instructs them to **wait**.

Amidst life surging business and urgent activity ----- we must sometimes take the time to wait ----- and to receive.

The time to wait and attend on the Holy Spirit --- in order to receive it.

Similar to when Jesus first breathed the Spirit on his disciples when they gathered in fear behind locked doors post crucifixion ----- so were the disciples just about to be filled with confusion and likely fear --- as Jesus is whisked away from them as He ascends back to God's side.

And just as Jesus did then --- in John 20 ---- saying peace be with you --- receive the Holy Spirit.

So He does now ----- instructing His Disciples to be calm ---- to still themselves ----- and wait and attend on the gift from God that is the Holy Spirit before they embark on a lifetime of witness.

The book of Acts tells the story of a fearful --- waiting community --- a community of believers that is anxious and bewildered --- having no power of its own.

And the book of Acts bears witness to the reality that power is given to this community.

Power that causes this fearful --- anxious --- fragile little community ----- to have energy --- courage ---- imagination --- and resources completely disproportionate to their size.

The book of Acts bears witness ---- to all that is possible through the Holy Spirit of God and the Holy Spirit of the Risen Lord.

The book of Acts reminds us that we are called by Jesus Christ to be His witnesses.

And the book of Acts reminds us that we are to be His witness through the power and influence and guidance and sustenance of the Holy Spirit.

What adventure it is when we witness in His name in and through His Spirit.

What freedom it is when we do what we do as Disciples of Christ in and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The sky --- and beyond ----- is the limit ---- the possibilities are endless.

And this is precisely how I feel about our witness and ministry here ----- it is limitless.

We have been blessed with great and faithful leaders here --- the session --- our elders.

We have been blessed with great and faithful teachers and helpers in our Sunday School ---- we expressed our appreciation earlier today and will again after the service as we provide lunch for them in the parlour.

We have been blessed with great musical leadership ----- Brian and our praise team ---- and you too Tim --- thank you for being here again today ---- -- and a few more times over the next few weeks.

We are blessed beyond measure --- through generosity --- shared gifts and resources.

We are blessed beyond measure through the generosity of those who have gone before us ----- Frank Sleep and others who did their best to ensure that ministry in Christ's name carries on.

We are blessed.

We are called.

We are equipped.

We are to be His witnesses ----- in Jerusalem ----- in and around Whitby --- Oshawa --- Ajax --- Pickering ---- Courtice ----- and in all Judea ---- Durham ----- and Samaria ---- Ontario ---- Canada -----and to the ends of the earth.

May we fulfill our calling in Christ --- may we witness to His name.

And may we do so in the power and influence of the Holy Spirit.

We're not called to get all twisted up in knots as to how we are to witness --- trying to prove or define or date certain things.

Witness is about praying and seeking God's guidance --- God's Spirit.

If you're unsure of what words to use --- when to speak them --- who to speak them to.

If you're unsure at all about what to say or do ----- pray about it.

Come and see me about it.

Life ----- Christian witness is not meant to be like an obstacle course or examination.

"You will be my witnesses" --- Christ said.

And I will provide you with the Holy Spirit.

There is great freedom and great comfort in this.

It's liberating to know that we do what we do as Disciples is thanks to the Holy Spirit and the power and the presence of our Risen Lord --- and not anything self generated.

May it be so in our lives.

May we witness in His name ----- and through His Spirit ----- as we strive to be more and more Christlike ---- forever preparing ourselves and others for the day of His second and beautiful final return.

Amen.