**YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES**

April 15, 2018

Acts 1:1-26

Key Verse 1:8 “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.”

The gospel, you might say in one sense, tells the story of the finished work of Christ. Jesus said in his high priestly prayer in anticipation of the cross in John 17:4, “I have finished the work you gave me to do.” And then on the cross, in John 19:30, just before he gave up his life, he said, “It is finished.” By the sacrifice and offering of himself, he saved forever those who believed, and he secured their redemption by his resurrection from the dead. Now nothing can be added to the finished work of Christ. The work of redemption Jesus finished. The work of doing and teaching he just began. The work of proclaiming the gospel, teaching the kingdom, and living the kingdom he only began. It is what Paul meant in Colossians 1:24, “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions.” Acts continues the story, the long process completing God’s redemptive work through his apostles. Acts covers about 33 years of history. In such a short time, ordinary men and women turned the world upside down. They brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole Roman world. How was it possible? They were not well trained Bible scholars. They did not have money. But when the Holy Spirit came to them, and they obeyed the Holy Spirit’s leading, the great work of God was possible.

Look at verse 3. “After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.” Jesus Christ rose from the dead. This is the most significant event in human history. Jesus’ resurrection is God’s victory over the power of sin and death and the devil. Jesus’ resurrection marked a new beginning for mankind to live victoriously in this world. Jesus’ resurrection opened the door to paradise for all who believe in him. Men who suffered from fear and despair under the shadow of death and the power of sin could now have hope in the Risen Christ: as Jesus rose from the dead, so shall we. When he appeared to his apostles, the Risen Christ spoke about the kingdom of God. This was the content of his message from the beginning. In Mark 1:15 he said, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” At the Last Supper he told his disciples, “For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God” (Lk 22:16). The book of Acts ends with, “He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hinderance!” The kingdom of God is both the present spiritual reign of God and the future realm over which he will rule in power and glory. That is why Jesus told us to pray, “Your kingdom come.”

Look at verse 6. The apostles expected Jesus to restore the kingdom to Israel according to the Jewish thought of restoring David’s kingdom. Jesus did not rebuke their thought completely. But he taught them that it is not for them to know the times or dates that the Father has set by his own authority. Down through the generations many people have tried to systematize their Bible knowledge and develop timetables and charts to foretell the Second Coming of Christ. They have all been wrong. Only God knows when Jesus will come again. We must respect God’s sovereign rule of his redemptive history. We work as if every day is our last, and we plan as if his coming is far off, and we leave the date to him. I don’t know when I’m going to die. I don’t want to know. I just want to work every day as if it is my last.

Then what should Jesus’ apostles do? Look at verse 8. “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.” Jesus says that his apostles will be his witnesses by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives his people the power to testify about Jesus. Without the Holy Spirit no one can testify about Jesus. A man may be highly talented, intensively trained, and widely experienced, but without spiritual power he is ineffective. On the other hand, a man may be uneducated, unattractive, and unrefined, yet with the power of the Holy Spirit, he can be a powerful witness. The fearful disciples needed power for witnessing, holy boldness for preaching the gospel. They would receive this power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. In John 15:26,27 Jesus said, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father--the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father--he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.” When the Holy Spirit works in us, we are compelled to witness to Jesus with burning hearts.

Look at verse 8 again. “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.” Jesus revealed his plan of evangelism. The apostles must begin witnessing in Jerusalem, where Jesus had been crucified. There were hostile forces in Jerusalem. But there were also many people whose hearts were ready to accept the gospel. It is where God chose to start the work of the Holy Spirit. Generally, we should begin witnessing to Jesus where we are, especially with our family members. But some think that the place where they are is not a good place to begin for many reasons. The real problem is that they do not have the Holy Spirit’s power to be Jesus’ witnesses. When the Holy Spirit works in us, any place can be a fruitful mission field.

The gospel would spread to Judea and Samaria. Here Judea symbolizes our friends, Samaria symbolizes those who we don’t like. Jews and Samaritans had experienced centuries of hostility toward each other based on cultural and racial prejudice. But the gospel of Jesus is universal. It applies to all men. All men are sinners and all men can be saved when they simply repent of their sins and accept Jesus’ saving grace by faith. The spread of the gospel to Judea and Samaria foreshadows the destruction of all human barriers and the coming of true peace in the world. Then the gospel would go to the ends of the earth. This reveals God’s universal love for all people. God loves all people of the whole world. He is not willing that anyone perish, but wants everyone to be saved. For this, he sacrificed his one and only Son Jesus Christ on the cross as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. For this, he raised Jesus from the dead and made him the source of eternal salvation to all who believe in him. For this, he was sending his apostles out into the world to be his witnesses.

The word witness, is a very interesting word. It is martyres, plural. We get the English word martyr. What is the connection? The connection is that the word witness came to be the word martyr because so many witnesses to the gospel died. Word came to mean one who dies for his testimony because so many did. You remember when Paul said, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2Tim 3:12) In order to be a disciple of Jesus, you have to be willing to lose your own life. Christ is on trial. The Holy Spirit is the lawyer for the defense. The Spirit calls you into the court of the world to give a testimony. You need to decide what kind of witness you will be; good, bad, or indifferent. Think about the apostles’ message. They were saying that people were sinners, and they were going to perish in their sin. It was alien to the Jews. It was a horrible message to the Gentiles. Persecution was happening everywhere so that witnesses essentially became martyrs because it was so tough. They were going into the Roman world full of slaves, and they were saying that if you are going to enter the kingdom of God, it is necessary that you become a slave of Jesus. The worst possible invitation imaginable was to say to somebody, “You need to become a slave, and the master is a crucified Jew from Israel.” This was a very hard sell; foolishness, stumbling block. Keep in mind that there was no support for that message at all. How nice it would be if joining a church would make you rich and successful and everything goes well, you would be honored and respected. But they were aliens in an anti-Christian culture as it is today. So our witnessing should be credible so that others may believe in spite of horrible messages.

If you are a Christian, you have received the Holy Spirit. If you have received the Holy Spirit, you are a witness. The only question is if you are a faithful one or an unfaithful one. The kingdom advances not through politics, not through some kind of cultural morality. The kingdom advances one soul at a time through personal testimony, personal witness. And always remember that statement by the German philosopher, Heinrich Heine. “Show me your redeemed life, and I might be inclined to believe in your redeemer.” Pretty hard to make the gospel believable unless it’s believable when somebody looks at you. Not that you have to be perfect, but you have to be clearly committed to the truth you teach. There are lots of people who talk about Christ but don’t live a life that points to his power. Many people make a lame excuse, “I wouldn’t want to be a Christian because there are so many hypocrites.” There is some truth to it. Powerful preaching comes from the overflow of powerful demonstration of the transforming power of the gospel.

Look at verses 9-11. “After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? 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.’” Jesus’ ascension gives us hope in his second coming in power and glory. This same Jesus who was a good shepherd for his people will come back as King and Judge to establish the Kingdom of God forever. Sometimes we want to be spectators watching for his return, like the disciples looking intently into the sky. But the angels urge us, “Don’t just stand there! Participate in world mission by being Jesus’ witnesses.” Look at verse 12. “Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city.” At the rebuke of the angels the disciples withdrew their gaze from the cloud and they returned to Jerusalem. Of course, they had a lingering fear of the Jews who killed Jesus on the cross. But that did not deter their obedience to Jesus’ command, “Do not leave Jerusalem.” The power of the risen Jesus overwhelmed their hearts. They could obey his direction to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. They were beginning to change from fearful men into obedient men of God with world mission vision.

Look at verse 14. “They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” These eleven men---who had distinct personalities, and who had struggled with one another for more power ---joined together in prayer. This was possible when they met the risen Christ and received the same direction to obey the world mission command. When they saw each other in light of the world mission command, they realized that they were members of the same team, not rivals. They could be one in spirit with a common prayer topic. Throughout history, when men joined together in prayer to obey Jesus’ command, there was a great work of God. In 1727, the disgruntled community at Herrnhut, Germany, was deeply divided and critical of one another, over many non-essential things such as baptism. But Count Zinzendorf called a united prayer meeting for world mission. A 24-hour-a-day prayer chain was organized. At least 2 people were at prayer every hour of the day. Astonishingly this prayer meeting lasted 100 years. Through their prayer, more than 100 missionaries left that village community in the next 25 years.

While they were praying together, Peter stood up among them. Peter stood up by faith, even though he denied Jesus three times. Thus, Peter took the cross of leadership for the early church. It was for the sake of solving a painful problem that was hindering their united prayer. Look at verses 16-17. “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus---he was one of our number and shared in this ministry.’” They were still suffering from the tragedy of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal. It was like an elephant in the room. They had a strong human attachment to Judas. He had been with them for more than three years. They had trusted him and shared sufferings together with him. Then, without warning, he not only left their fellowship, but became a betrayer and died tragically. They had to overcome their human thinking. Sympathy for Judas would ruin the purity and harmony of their fellowship. There was also a problem of spiritual doubt. Since Jesus had chosen Judas, how could he become a betrayer? Did Jesus make a mistake? If so, they could doubt their own calling. They could not really trust each other. Moreover, Judas’ tragic death had become a scandal known all over Jerusalem. It became the fodder for the devil’s work. If they were to be truly one in spirit and purpose, they had to resolve this problem. But it was painful.

It is amazing that through the Bible study Peter found a solution, that is, Judas’ betrayal was according to the Scriptures (Lk 22:22). They did not need to understand why, but only to accept God’s sovereign rule in the matter and renew their trust and faith in God. On this basis they could trust one another and commit their lives to the Christian fellowship. Their fellowship was not a human fellowship. Their fellowship was governed by the word of God and existed for the glory of God. Even such a painful event as Judas’ betrayal was for the glory of God. When a growing sheep leaves us, we struggle to overcome our sense of failure. We suffer due to nagging feelings of doubt. We are afraid to feed sheep because we think they may leave soon. So why bother? But we should accept even their leaving as the sovereign will of God. When Peter accepted Judas’ betrayal as the will of God, he was able to mend the fellowship of God.

May the Holy Spirit empower you to be Jesus’ witnesses where you are and make you a prayer servant for world mission.