

To the End of the Earth

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[0 : 00] So when we first planted our church, and this was a long time ago by now, feels like a long time ago, one of the first things we did was to spend about seven months preaching through the book of Acts.

Our church was fairly new, and we needed desperately to set a course for the way forward to figure out who we are as a church, why we're here in D.C., and what we're called to be and to do as a result of God calling us here.

So we went through the book of Acts to try to discern a vision for our own church, and coming out of the pandemic, we, like many churches around the country, feel like we're replanting this church. And luckily, we're not starting from scratch like we did last time, but there's a lot that needs to be reclarified, a lot that needs to be rebuilt after this past year.

And so because of that, I feel it very appropriate to go back to the book of Acts, like we did when we first planted the church. Because once again, we need to set a course, and we need to ask God to show us who we are, why we're here as a church, and what we should hope to see in the city in the years to come as a result of our presence here.

[1 : 18] So that's what we're going to do starting today, starting this morning. Specifically, we're going to be in a series looking at the first half of the book of Acts, from Acts chapter 1 through Acts chapter 15, and we're going to see the story of the birth of the church and then the impact that the church had on the greater world.

And as we hear the story of the birth of the church, we're going to clarify our vision for the future of our church. So this morning, we're going to be looking at the first two chapters of the book of Acts. We're going to look at where it all begins, the birth of the church, and we're going to see that three major things mark the birth of the church.

So three major things mark the birth of the institution that we are a part of. And it's these three things. We see first the hope of a resurrected body that enters the world, the hope of a resurrected body, the death of a nationalist fantasy, and then the birth of a new humanity.

So we're going to look at those in that order. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for your Holy Spirit. And right now, our desire, our hope, is that your Holy Spirit would empower and clarify our understanding of your word.

[2 : 45] Bring it to life. And that through your written word, we would come face to face with the living word, Jesus Christ. And that Jesus Christ would call us forward as a community and teach us what it means to follow as faithful disciples in this day and age.

Lord, we pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. So first of all, we see the hope of a resurrected body. In Jesus' day, many people don't know this, there were as many as a dozen people claiming to be God's Messiah.

So in that regard, Jesus was not unique. There were a number of people claiming to be God's chosen Messiah. But all of those other would-be Messiahs shared roughly the same fate.

They announced that they were God's chosen Messiah. They amassed a group of followers. The Romans heard about it. The Romans found them, tortured them in some cases, executed them. And then not long after the execution, the followers dispersed and the movement died. And that's why you've never heard of any of these people. When it comes to Jesus Christ, we see something entirely unique.

[4 : 03] Following the crucifixion of Jesus, Christianity exploded unlike anything the world had ever seen. What we need to understand is the church began as a tiny subculture of Judaism, a tiny subculture within the Greco-Roman world.

It was about .002% of the population would have been Christian. And it was largely composed, this early gathering of slaves and women and the poor and people largely without rights in this society. And yet somehow, following the crucifixion of Jesus over the next two centuries, this movement came to span all races, all ethnicities, all socioeconomic classes in its membership. And it so radically transformed the Greco-Roman world that the Roman emperors not only ceased in their persecution of Christianity, but they began to reluctantly admit that Christians were the ones holding Roman society together as it crumbled. And so it is a profound sociological and historical mystery to try to figure out how such a thing could have happened.

[5 : 28] How is it possible? And the answer is the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of the church.

This is why Luke says in the opening verses of the book of Acts, which is essentially Luke part 2, the first thing he tells us in verse 3 is that Jesus presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs.

Jesus founded the church, and after he rose from death, Jesus continued to lead his church. We do not follow a dead founder. Our founder is alive and continues to lead the church that he founded. Another way to say this would be without the resurrection, there would be no church. So for churches that deny the resurrection, or rather say that the resurrection is metaphorical, not historical, they are functionally denying their own foundation.

But the resurrection of Jesus is actually more than just a foundation. It's actually the essence of the church. It's the essence of what it means to be the church.

[6 : 42] All throughout the New Testament, the church is called the body of Christ, and that's not just poetry. What this tells us is that we as a church, we as Church of the Advent, if we want to know what it means to be a church in a place like D.C., we need to ask how do we function as the body of Christ in the world?

And the only way to learn that is to look at the body of Christ, and to learn how to be His body by looking at His body. And we look at the risen body of Jesus, and we see first that Jesus' body proves that this world matters to God, that matter matters to God.

We see that God plans to do in the world what He did in Jesus' body, which is to resurrect it and renew it. One of the most besetting tendencies in the church is to try to remain aloof from the day-in, day-out realities of the world, as though we are somehow above or beyond, as though that is somehow below us.

But what we see in the resurrected body of Jesus is that the flesh-and-blood realities of this world, our day-in, day-out realities, matter to God. The world matters to God. So we can't, as a church, remain aloof or float above the problems of society.

We have to be engaged. We have to be active. We have to care about this world. We have to care about our neighborhoods. We have to care about our schools. We have to care about our local leaders. This is what it means to be salt and light in the world, being in the world but not of it.

[8 : 22] We look at Jesus' body, and Jesus' body bears wounds and scars. His resurrected body bears wounds and scars because Jesus was willing to suffer for the sake of those He loves.

Therefore, we as the church must be willing to suffer, laying our lives down if we must in order to bring the hope of the gospel to a world that desperately needs it.

And Jesus' body has overcome sin and death, which means we as the church have nothing to fear. We have nothing to fear. No matter whose administration we sit under, no matter what direction our country takes, we have nothing to fear.

Because Christ's body is the foundation and the essence of our identity as the church in the world. So this is what we see in the opening verses of Acts.

Jesus is alive and well. He not only founded the church, but He is leading His church. But there are obstacles that must be overcome. And we see one of those obstacles as we move forward in this account in Acts.

[9 : 28] In verse 6, chapter 1, So when they had come together, they asked Him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

Now, it's understandable why they would ask Jesus this for at least two reasons. First of all, there are Old Testament prophecies such as Isaiah 11 and Ezekiel 37 that promise that when the Messiah comes, He's going to reunite the tribes of Israel.

It's a biblical question they're asking. Beyond that, the Jewish people had been severely oppressed and mistreated by those in power for a very long time.

They had lived in a society where they didn't have a whole lot of privilege and they had an occupying presence in the form of Rome that had oppressed them and mistreated them.

They had felt like second-class citizens for as long as they could remember. So no wonder this nationalist fantasy had sort of captured their imagination, right? One day the Messiah is going to come.

[10:35] One day the Messiah is going to vindicate us. One day we're no longer going to be under the boot of the oppressors, right? One day He's going to set us free from the Romans. And finally we're going to have power of our own.

Finally we're going to have self-determination. Finally we're going to be able to control our own destiny. And finally, if need be, we'll be able to impose our will on others.

Surely God wants that for us. We're His chosen people. Surely God wants that for us. And you know, basic nationalism, the organization of people into self-governing nations is neither here nor there.

It's simply a very logical way of ordering society. And a certain amount of loyalty to one's nation makes a lot of sense. But there are ways that nationalism and a kind of nationalistic fantasy can become distorted.

Where it starts to become a zero-sum game. Where it becomes a certain set of assumptions about power. About superiority. When it becomes about protecting your own self-interest above all else.

[11:48] Right? One such example of this is the current example of Christian nationalism. Right? Which is a factor in our society right now.

It's a kind of conflation of American identity and Christianity. And it is largely adhered to overwhelmingly by white Americans.

And it's a desire. It's very hard to define. But it's essentially a desire to define America as a Christian nation. It's an expectation that the government should promote a Christian cultural template as the official culture of the country as a whole.

And it's a tendency to treat those who fall outside of that cultural template as secondary citizens.

And it's remarkably similar. If you look at the dynamics underlying Christian nationalism in our country right now.

And you look at the Jewish nationalism that we're seeing in Acts chapter 1. They're remarkably similar. They're remarkably similar. But the thing that Acts drives home.

[13:00] And some would say the entire book of Acts is about this. Is that this is not the mission of Jesus. It's understandable in some ways. But it is not the mission of Jesus.

Because Jesus is going to reunite Israel. But it's going to be a new Israel. It's going to be an Israel unlike anything the world has ever seen before. He says in verse 8. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.

And you will be my witnesses. In Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. What you just saw there is the table of contents for the book of Acts.

This is the outline of the entire rest of the book. Right? The gospel explodes. The gospel explodes.

And then the shock wave goes outward. In chapters 2 through 7 we see it in Jerusalem.

Chapters 8 through 12 we see it in Judea and Samaria. Chapters 13 through 28 it goes to the ends of the earth. And guess what? It is still going. It is still going. We are still writing the book of Acts.

[14:03] The mission of Jesus is not limited to one nation. It's about going to all the nations. The commentary by Willie James Jennings.

He says this. The deepest reality of life in the spirit depicted in the book of Acts is that the disciples of Jesus, listen to this, rarely if ever go where they want to go.

Or to whom they would want to go. Indeed the spirit seems to always be pressing the disciples to go to those to whom they would in fact strongly prefer never to share space or a meal.

And definitely not life together. And listen to this. Listen to that.

We think of a spirit filled church as a church where people are speaking in tongues and speaking words of knowledge and being slain in the spirit. And maybe that's true. I'm not denying that.

[15:09] But this passage shows us that a spirit filled church is one where people are filled with a divine desire to love and to serve the very kinds of people they would otherwise prefer to avoid.

That's a spirit filled church. And this is setting up a choice for us as the readers. You can either be a nationalist in the distorted ways that we just talked about or you can be a witness.

But you cannot be both a nationalist and a witness. You can either choose life inside the walls where you focus on power, you focus on boundaries, you focus on self-protection, you focus on rights, you focus on preserving your way of life.

Or you can choose to go over the walls. You can be sent into the unknown. You can be sent into the unpredictable world. You can be sent into places where you may have no rights with no guarantee of success to tell what you have seen and heard in Jesus Christ.

That means relinquishing power. It means making yourself vulnerable. It means very likely suffering for the sake of people, suffering for the sake of people who may be directly opposed to everything you stand for.

[16:30] That's what it means to be a witness. The death of a nationalist fantasy. What we see in Acts is, it's funny, of all the details Luke could have included in this account, he said, one thing we have to include, if people really need to understand what the church is about, is this conversation.

Where Jesus said, no, no, no, no. I'm not here to fulfill your nationalist fantasy. I'm going to do something completely new and different. And this is necessary because the entire point of the coming of the Holy Spirit is that it is meant to bring about the birth of a new humanity.

In Acts chapter 2, the Holy Spirit comes like a mighty rushing wind and he fills the apostles. The Spirit fills the apostles.

And as he fills the apostles, they begin to speak in other languages. That is incredibly significant. God could have said, I'm going to send the Holy Spirit and he's going to make it possible for everybody to understand Hebrew or Greek or Aramaic.

Right? But that's not what happens. He sends the Holy Spirit and the speakers speak in multiple languages. Now that should inform everything about the way we think about mission and evangelism.

[17:52] Right? The gospel is meant to be translated. Our lives are meant to be translated. This is the difference between, we said there's a difference between nationalism and witness.

There's also a difference between cultural imperialism and witness. From the very beginning, the church has always been multi-ethnic, multicultural, multilingual.

From the very beginning. So people are wondering, how am I possibly, how is this happening? Are they drunk? Am I drunk? Or is this mass hallucination?

And Peter speaks up and says, hey, this is exactly what the prophet Joel said was going to happen. When the Spirit comes, he's like, you know, get out your scripture. Read it for yourself. This is exactly what we've been waiting for.

When the Spirit comes, it means a new world order has come to overturn the old world order. What's the difference? In the old days, the Spirit of God would barely touch certain select few people.

[18:55] Every now and then, God would raise up a prophet and the Spirit of God would be upon him. That's the old world order. That's the old world order. But in the new world order, the Holy Spirit of God, who used to only touch a select few prophets here and there, is now going to fill all of God's people.

Men and women, he says. Young and old, he says. Slaves and free, he says. Everybody that God calls is going to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Not just the Spirit being upon them, but filling them.

A new humanity. And he says. Salvation is clearly not only for the Jews, but for everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord. All of the people whom God calls to himself will now be saved.

Jesus has ascended to the throne of heaven. We see the ascension happen, and now he is establishing a new humanity on the earth. You know, I read Acts for so many years and never understood how unbelievably political this book is.

You know, this is a world where you could believe whatever you wanted as long as you didn't threaten your ultimate allegiance to the emperor. That was the real religion. It was fidelity to the state.

[20:12] Politics was the real God. And this says, all of you politicians, all of you leaders of state, you all just lost your power. You all just lost your authority.

We'll continue to function as though you have authority for a while, and God's going to work through that. But there's now a king in the throne. There's now the king of the world is risen. Right? And so

people hear this, and they hear that the very person that you executed, God has exalted and made both Lord and Christ.

And it cuts them to the heart, and they say, what shall we do? What do we do? And Peter says, repent and be baptized. Repent means to turn away from all of your old agendas, all of your old allegiances, all of your old idols, all of your substitute gods, and give yourself fully to King Jesus, who died for your sin and now sits in the throne of the world.

And then he says, be baptized. Put off your old self, put that old self to death, and take on the new identity of Jesus Christ as your identity.

Take on his righteousness, take his inheritance, take his priorities, take his mission as your own. You've got to understand, repent and be baptized is all about death and life.

[21 : 33] It's all about a new identity. He's saying the only way to respond to Jesus is to repent and be baptized and to become a part of this new humanity that Jesus is building in the world.

And through baptism, we are reborn into this new humanity as the body of Christ. So this is the birth of the church. And these points, the hope of a resurrected body, the death of a nationalist fantasy, the birth of a new humanity, these themes really set the course for the book, but they also set a course for us as we think about what we are called to be in this city and in the world.

So as we contemplate our future together as a church, as we are rebuilding, trying to get everybody back together in person, starting up our programs and ministries, we're going to be rebuilding our sense of vision as well.

So we're going to be talking a lot about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We're going to be talking a lot about the ministry of the Holy Spirit and our desire to grow a ministry of the Holy Spirit, a ministry of healing prayer at Church of the Advent.

And some of you know about the class that we'll be hearing more about later in the service that's starting on May 6th, led by Rob Kretsch, that's going to be an exploratory step for us as a church in that direction.

[22 : 56] We're going to be talking a lot about the gifts of the Spirit, what it means to have a church where everybody is operating out of their gifts. We're going to be talking a lot about evangelism in the weeks, months, and years to come.

And our explicit desire to reach the unchurched, the de-churched, people who maybe grew up in the church, baptized as babies, but who have since walked away from the church, to reach people in our neighborhoods, to increase the number of adult baptisms that we have here at church.

We're going to be making that an explicit goal and asking and praying, how can the Holy Spirit lead us to become bold witnesses where we live and work? And we're going to be talking a lot about missions and what it looks like for us to actively and enthusiastically support and partner with other ministries and missionaries in other parts of the world, understanding that's a vital part of what it means to be a Spirit-filled church.

And we're going to be talking a lot about race, and we're going to be talking about the power of the gospel to bring racial justice and healing in our society.

And I think that last one is especially urgent for us as a church. It's especially urgent that the church be engaging issues of race and injustice and the need for healing.

[24 : 14] And that's a very controversial thing to bring up, but I'm just going to say a couple of things about it. We need to understand something about the conversation in our country around race and why the church has to speak up.

There are a lot of people out there who are trying to make a difference. There are a lot of people out there trying to do really good work, but you need to understand the dynamics at work. Listen to this. The major institutions who are driving the national conversation around race, politicians, activist organizations, social media companies, and news outlets all share one thing in common.

Despite their best intentions, they stand to benefit more when we are divided than when we are united. They benefit more from division.

Right? They benefit from animosity, from hostility, from fear, from outrage, because those things produce more votes for politicians, more contributions for activist organizations, more clicks and ad revenue for internet companies, and higher ratings for news outlets.

[25 : 22] This is the outrage industrial complex, and we have to understand the implications of that. We're talking about the commodification of hostility. It's the commodification of hostility.

We figured out how to monetize your negative emotions. And if churches like ours aren't speaking up, if we aren't putting the alternative of the gospel on display, then institutions like these are going to drive the entire conversation.

I fear things will only get worse despite the best intentions of many who are involved. But this is a really hard conversation for churches to have. It's a really hard conversation.

And I've talked to many, many, many pastors about this over the last couple of years in particular. And I've talked to many pastors at churches who are way further along than we are. And I hear the same thing from everybody.

Is that pastors and church leaders hear an almost continuous stream of criticism from their people. People saying, I'm so frustrated at my pastor.

[26 : 29] I'm so frustrated at my church for all the ways they've mishandled these issues. And here's what I want to say to that. I'm not going to tell you not to be frustrated. I'm not going to tell you that because it's an incredibly frustrating issue.

I think it's one of the hardest issues we as a church have faced in years. In decades, in centuries. I'm not going to tell you not to be frustrated. But here's what I'm going to tell you. Instead of being frustrated at your church, be frustrated alongside your church.

Because when you're frustrated at your church, you separate yourself out. You get to pretend like you always knew the better way to handle that situation. You always knew the more appropriate thing to say.

And your church is screwing it up. You get to act like you would never fail. You get to occupy this position where you're able to say all the things that you should have said and should have done. But you don't actually have to risk anything.

You don't have to fail. You don't have to repent. You don't have to own your own shortcomings. So you're really missing out if you're frustrated at the people who are actually trying to do something.

[27 : 37] Instead, be frustrated alongside your church. Yeah, be frustrated. Be angry. But let's do it together. Share some of the responsibility. Share some of the load.

Take some risks. Be willing to fail. Be willing to repent. Be willing to face your own shortcomings. And the good news is you're not going to do it alone. Because we can do it together. We can be frustrated.

And if necessary, together, we can fail as often as we need to in order to actually make progress.

You know, many of us wonder, what's our church going to look like 10 years from now?

20 years from now? I can't say. But my prayer is that we are a spirit-filled, boundary-crossing, border-transgressing community of witnesses, and that like the resurrected body of Jesus, we have the scars to prove it.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you. We thank you for your spirit. And we desire to be filled with the spirit. But I really, really think that we don't know what we're asking for when we want to be spirit-filled.

[28 : 47] Because what that means is we actually have to let go of control. And we actually have to relinquish our agenda. We have to let go of our preferences.

We have to let go of a lot of what makes us feel comfortable. Lord, what we see here is your Holy Spirit coming and calling your people to go in a direction that they would very much prefer not to go. Lord, so may we be a spirit-filled church in that sense of the word. Lord, may we relinquish control and preference to you and trust you to lead us.

We pray this in your Son's holy name, that we might be a church not simply that exists to meet our own needs, but that exists to truly glorify you. Amen.