

Acts 1:1-11

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[0 : 00] Our Father in heaven, as we hear your word, I pray by your spirit, we would encounter Jesus, I would be formed by Jesus, and now we would be sent by Jesus. We pray this in his name and for your glory. Amen.

You can be seated. Well, before I start, if you are new here this morning or you're relatively new to St. John's, I just want to say welcome.

My name's Chris. I'm one of the ministers here. And my primary job here is to help new people either get connected to our church or learn what it is we believe, talk about who Jesus is and why his story matters.

And so I would love to meet you. I'm running two things that Jordan will tell us about later in the service this week. I'm running a course right after this service called Introducing St. John's, if you're looking to get connected with our community.

And on Tuesday night, I'll be running a course called Introducing Jesus, if you want to learn who Jesus is and what all the fuss is about. So I'd love you to come to those. Jordan will tell us more details later in the service.

[1 : 09] But here we are a week after Easter. And last week, we heard this unbelievable news. We heard a man who had died had risen from the dead.

Death, the inescapable reality, our greatest enemy, has been defeated. And if that is true, then it changes everything for every person in this room.

But more than that, every person who's ever lived. Because in Jesus now, there is a way through death, past death, into life.

We just said together that we believe Jesus died and was buried. And on the third day, he rose again. And this raises a really natural question.

If Jesus has actually defeated death, what happens now? Jesus' resurrection happened 2,000 years ago. And the last time I checked, death is very much still a reality of our lives.

[2 : 18] Death has been defeated, but death has not been destroyed. It's a bit like when an army wins a decisive battle, but the war does not immediately stop.

One of my grandfathers was a soldier in the British Army in World War II. And he participated in many military campaigns, including the storming of the Normandy beaches on D-Day, on June 6, 1944.

And after D-Day, we still have his postcards that he sent to his new bride, my grandmother, at home in Britain. And we have these, and they're dated, and they're all dated after D-Day.

And if you know the history of World War II, you know Germany didn't surrender for 11 months after D-Day. This was the decisive battle, the decisive moment in the European front during World War II. But the war did not end for nearly a year. There's another decisive moment, of course, during World War II, which was the dropping of the two atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

[3 : 24] Those bombs were dropped three months after Germany surrendered. But the war in the Pacific didn't end when the bombs fell. It took Japan nearly a month to surrender.

In the same way, death was defeated on Easter morning in the decisive battle. The Son of God raising victorious. But evil has not been destroyed.

So what is Jesus doing now? What happens after Easter? With all these questions, we now get to open our Bibles to the book of Acts and hear the beginning of the answer.

This is on page 909 of the book in front of you. It would be helpful to have it open. It begins in verse 1. In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up.

We learn that the book of Acts is a sequel. It's the second volume written by this guy named Luke. And the first was an account of Jesus' life from birth to death to resurrection and ascension that we now call the Gospel of Luke.

[4 : 38] And yet Luke says in Acts 1, verse 1, that his Gospel only records what Jesus began to do and teach. It's a bit surprising.

You'd expect Luke to write, In my first book, I dealt with all that Jesus did. But instead he says, It's about all that Jesus began to do and teach.

This shows us the work of Jesus did not end when he ascended. The book of Acts is the story of what Jesus continues to do. It's the acts of the risen Jesus.

And we're told two things about Jesus in our passage. First thing we're told is he is alive. Look at verse 3. Luke, who's a medical doctor, writes, This is not describing a ghost or a vision or a metaphor.

Therefore, it's a historical account of a man, Jesus, coming back from death and presenting himself alive to his apostles by many proofs.

[5 : 58] We're told the disciples saw him. They touched him. They heard him. We're told he stayed with them. He ate with them. He was as alive to them as I am to you right now.

All of these eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection will die defending that he is alive. None of them wavered in that conviction. The resurrection of Jesus is the central claim of the Christian faith.

The resurrection of Jesus proves everything Jesus did and everything he said. It's the turning point of our universe. It's the moment when life has conquered death.

When the kingdom of God has broken into our world and the powers of darkness are overcome. Jesus is alive. Death is defeated.

And that means a new world order has begun. The second thing Acts 1 tells us is that Jesus has ascended. This is near the end of our reading in verse 9.

[7 : 03] It says, The apostles were looking on and Jesus was lifted up. And a cloud took him out of their sight. And they were gazing up into heaven as he went.

So not only is Jesus risen from the dead, but he's now ascended into heaven. Jesus has been embraced into heaven. He's returned to heaven where he enjoys unity with the Father and is seated at his right hand.

The ascension proves that Jesus' sacrifice for our sins was accepted by God. The ascension shows us that our sins are truly forgiven and they're forgotten.

Jesus is victorious in his mission and he is now vindicated by his Father. His ascension proves he's Lord over all. So Acts chapter 1 tells us Jesus is alive and Jesus is reigning.

But what now? Because he's no longer physically present. So how can we say his work continues? The disciples ask a similar question in verse 6.

[8 : 14] Look, they say, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? You know, the disciples assume now that Jesus has defeated death, he's going to defeat all his other enemies as well.

And so his resurrection is going to bring military conquest and political victory and national restoration. You know, surely as Jesus has now defeated death, he's going to destroy all his other worldly enemies.

But that's not the plan. At least not yet. Look at verse 8. Jesus says to his followers, You'll receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.

And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. This verse is the key to the whole book of Acts.

It's almost like the table of contents that outlines what will happen in the rest of the book. And in fact, indeed, what will happen in the rest of human history. This is the last thing Jesus says before he ascends.

[9 : 17] He promises of his followers that it is they who will continue his work on earth. It's an impossibly large commission. It is too great a job for a handful of eyewitnesses to accomplish on their own.

But Jesus doesn't just leave them to figure it out. He doesn't say, Well, I've done my part. It's up to you now. Try your best. Good luck. In Acts 1, Jesus makes a promise to his people.

In fact, he makes two promises. He promises them, You will receive power. And he promises them, You will be my witnesses. See, Jesus hasn't stepped away from his mission.

He's taken the throne over it. Jesus does not retire. He is now reigning over all. The Lord Jesus is active today.

He's directing. He is ruling over creation. He is building his church. He is sustaining his people. He is interceding for us before the Father.

[10:31] This is how Jesus continues his work in the world. It's through his people, Empowered by his Spirit. The risen Jesus will continue to work in the world through his apostles, Through the eyewitness testimony of his followers, Who are filled with his Spirit.

So, I want to look at those two promises Jesus gives. First, Jesus promises, You will receive power. This is important.

The power that will spread the good news of Jesus Christ Does not come from within his followers. Jesus doesn't choose the best and the brightest.

He doesn't hire a master marketing firm. These are not impressive people by human standards.

You know, a handful of fishermen, A tax collector. These are ordinary, unremarkable people.

Not the kind of people you would expect to change the world. And that's the point. The end of verse 2 reminds us that Jesus has chosen these people.

[11:40] He's handpicked them. Jesus chose unremarkable people. Because when the church grows, When lives are changed, When the gospel spreads, We can't say, Well, of course it did.

Look at how impressive they were. It's the dream team out there. No. The mission of Jesus is not for a special class of Christians. It's not for the boldest, Or the most articulate, Or the most gifted, Or the most confident.

It's given to ordinary people. Who are willing to be used by God. Which means if you feel inadequate to be sent by Jesus, You're in the perfect place.

Imagine how the disciples felt. Because Jesus chooses people who seem inadequate. And he uses them to spread his gospel to the ends of the earth. Now notice also, They don't receive the Holy Spirit right away.

They have to wait. Jesus promises them they will receive power. But they don't get it right away. We know it takes ten days. And Jesus commands them to stay in Jerusalem.

[12:47] Wait. Don't do anything. Until the Holy Spirit comes. If you're anything like me, Waiting is hard. We want to act.

We want to get moving. Time is of the essence. But Jesus tells his followers, Do not get ahead of the Spirit. The work of God is not accomplished by human urgency.

It must be empowered by divine presence. The spread of Christianity through the book of Acts and beyond over the last 2,000 years is an ongoing testimony to the reality that it is God who is empowering the entire mission.

It's a miracle. It makes no sense. It's remarkable how Christianity has spread across cultures and continents over 2,000 years. It's the most successful movement in world history.

It's the most successful movement in world history. And the only explanation is that the power behind it does not come from us, but from God. The mission of the church is not human powered.

[13:54] Our mission and our ministry is not dependent on our ability to propel it forward. And if we forget that, if we start operating on our own strength, then pretty soon we're going to run out of gas or steer off course and lose our way.

It's a bit like, let's imagine all of us together this morning make a decision that we are going to go on a trip to Winnipeg to visit our good friend Will Gray, who's planting a church there.

Imagine how Will would react when we knock on his door and he opens it and there's 400 of us standing on his doorstep. I hear it's beautiful in Winnipeg in April, although I've never been. Imagine we decide to rent a plane that fits all of us.

And we all get in, buckle our seatbelts, ready to go, but we look out our windows and we realize our plane has no engines, just wings. Well, it doesn't really matter how motivated we are to go.

It doesn't really matter how capable we are to get there. We are not going to Winnipeg because we don't have the power that is needed to get us there. In the same way, the apostles did not have in themselves what was required to continue the work of Jesus.

[15:14] And neither do we. We need a power from outside ourselves. We need a power source that is infinitely greater than ourselves if we are to succeed in continuing Jesus' work on earth.

And Jesus promises that we will receive it. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

God's Holy Spirit comes upon them and when he does, he changes everything. Fearful people become the boldest of witnesses.

And a small group of scared eyewitnesses go out and start a global movement. You can just look at one of them, Peter. You may remember Peter on Good Friday.

Remember what was Peter doing on Good Friday? He was cowering and running and denying he knew Jesus. He ran for his life and he abandoned Jesus.

[16:19] And now here we are 50 days later and Peter receives the Holy Spirit. He stands up in the middle of Jerusalem. He witnesses to what he has seen.

And we're told 3,000 people are cut to the heart by Peter's words. They receive his testimony and they are baptized in a single day. What's changed? It's 50 days.

It's the same guy. It's unbelievable. It's unbelievable. What's changed is Peter has received power just as Jesus promised. And Peter has seen something that has changed him forever.

The power that transforms Jesus' cowardly disciples into bold apostles is the same power that's available to all of us today. The Holy Spirit has never left.

And through the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ announces and continues that he is at the work in the world today. And once the apostles are empowered they are immediately sent.

[17:21] This is Jesus' second promise. You will be my witnesses. The apostles aren't inventing a message. They are just merely testifying to what they have seen.

Jesus died and now he's alive and he's ascended into heaven. And these guys have seen it. They have seen the Lord. Most of us, if we're honest, are terrified of ever being in a situation where we're going to be called upon to share our faith in Jesus.

Right? If you want to know what scares Christians, mention the word evangelism. We feel inadequate. We think, I don't have a PhD in theology.

I don't have brilliant answers to all the secular arguments against Christianity. You know, that's what Jordan's for, right? But Jesus does not say we will all be his theologians or his master debaters or his apologists.

He says, you will be my witnesses. In a courtroom, a witness does not argue the case. A witness simply tells what they have seen.

[18:35] A witness is not asked to speculate or to argue, but they simply share what they've experienced. And this is what Jesus is inviting his followers to do.

You don't need to have all the answers. Rather, we are invited to witness to Jesus. To simply, humbly, honestly, share what Jesus has done in our life.

That's witnessing. It's talking about how you have seen the Lord at work. It's not up to us to argue people to faith or to have all the answers to life's questions.

Rather, it's to witness. To simply share what Jesus has done for us and how we've seen him at work in the world. I was at a different church and the pastor there shared in a sermon that he was annoyed how there was this sort of liturgy in secular culture where, you know, think you go to a grocery store and the cashier says, oh, how are you doing?

And you say, oh, I'm good, thanks. How are you? And he just, the shallowness of those words bothered him. And he thought, how can I witness to Jesus in such an everyday mundane dialogue?

[19:49] And so he tried something. When the person said, oh, how are you doing? He'd answer the question by saying, I'm blessed. And he'd see how they'd respond. Interesting.

Simple, gentle witness. It might be you run into a friend this week who asks how you're doing and instead of some, you know, surface answer, you say, honestly, it's been a really hard week for me. But through it, I've been praying and I've really sensed God's peace in my life. That's witnessing. It's not a speech. It's not an argument. It's not a sermon.

It's just telling the truth about who Jesus is and what he's done in your life. There are stories here at St. John's of people coming to faith in the last few months.

And the stories often involve simple witness. It's just stories of God's people here at this church witnessing to who Jesus is when they are asked and inviting people to come and see what Jesus has done.

[20:49] It's the same thing Christians have been doing for 2,000 years. You will be empowered and you will be my witnesses. The apostles spend the rest of their lives bearing witness to this reality.

The word witness in the original Greek is literally the word martyr. It's a Greek word. Martyr. It means to witness. And the apostles who Jesus is talking to he makes these promises to will stake their lives on this truth.

Almost all of them will lose their lives because of this witness. You will be my witnesses my martyrs starting in Jerusalem but then in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

The movement will go outward. Never going to look at spike ball the same Jordan. You've changed it for me. In the four gospels the movement is sorry in the four gospels Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem isn't he?

The gospel story is Jesus coming to Jerusalem to die on the cross and then to be raised from the dead. But as soon as he's risen changes direction and now the gospel goes out.

[21 : 58] It starts in one city and it spreads out over the whole world. Christianity does not have a geographic center. It makes it distinct from almost every other religion in the world. There isn't a geographic center.

The center of our faith is God the Holy Spirit filling his people and that happens everywhere. What's amazing is how Jesus makes this promise and how we can stand 2,000 years later and we can testify that the promise came true.

In roughly 70 generations the message of Jesus has indeed spread across the globe. It's gone from a tiny group of Jews in Jerusalem to billions of people from around the world who now confess that Jesus is Lord.

Acts begins the story of how Jesus accomplishes his work through his apostles. And it's not the story of what the apostles did. You know the title the Acts of the Apostles it's a misnomer.

This is the story of the Acts of the risen Jesus through his apostles empowered by his Holy Spirit. And that brings us into the story.

[23 : 04] Because the book of Acts is not just history. It's the story of God at work in the world and that story is still being written. The risen and ascended Jesus is still at work in the world today.

And he works the same way through filling his people with his spirit as we bear witness to him in word and deed. And in Acts we see again and again Jesus working through his people as they proclaim the gospel and his lives are changed.

And so the question is not what was happening back then. The question is are we participating now? Because the same spirit has been given to us. We have the same testimony.

We have the same mission. The same risen Jesus still reigns over all. And so we begin the series of Acts and what we need to see is that the work of Jesus did not stop at Easter.

It continues and we are invited into it. The book of Acts is this. It's the acts of the risen Jesus through his people empowered by his spirit.

[24 : 15] And as the father has sent the son so now the son is sending us. Thanks be to God. Amen.