



## It's GO time!

An Ascension Sunday sermon by Pastor Rob Hamilton in the Spirited Adventures Series  
Delivered on May 29, 2022 on Acts 1:1-14NRSV

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

## **Preamble**

Pastor Lisa and I launching a new preaching series today that follows the book of Acts, in the Spirit of Pentecost - which we celebrate next week- called Spirited Adventures: How the Holy Spirit moves us to the ends of the earth. This coincides with our new VBS-type program for kids and parents that takes place once a month this summer.

What we want to do in this series is for us to see how the Holy Spirit fills, empowers and sends Jesus' disciples in the book of Acts in ministry to new people and new places. Our intended outcome for this series is connecting us as disciples of Jesus Christ today to that same mission of adventures in the Holy Spirit. Because we believe the Holy Spirit still fills, empowers and sends disciples of Jesus Christ, like us, to be witnesses of Jesus to new places and new people still today.

We start the series today with the very beginning of the book of Acts. The same author who wrote the gospel of Luke, also wrote this book of Acts as a witness to the continuation of Jesus' ministry through the Spirit-filled disciples. This first chapter of Acts and this first sermon in the series is to set us up for our Spirited Adventures, the text is really about getting our marching orders.

So as we get ready for this new adventure in the Spirit, today I invite you to pray with me and for me. Let us pray:

## **Prayer of Illumination**

Jesus, our King of kings and Lord of lords,

In your ascension, you have taken your place on the throne of heaven. If we find favor in your majesty come down and sit on the throne of our hearts. Rule in my life as I expound on your word. Rule in the lives of this congregation as you direct us as your loyal and willing servants. Amen.

## **Sermon**

I'll admit what John read for us is a lot to wrap our heads around, right?

Jesus is walking with his disciples, they ask questions, Jesus sets the disciples straight, tells them about the Holy Spirit and then Jesus is either beamed up or rides some glass elevator or maybe he drifts up to heaven like a helium balloon. Then angels appear in the sky to send the disciples back to Jerusalem. The disciples go back to the upper room in Jerusalem, join some of the other apostles and commit themselves to praying... and that's it. I think a plain reading here is not terribly inspiring for us today. It reads like a historical account and doesn't seem to invite us to our own adventure today.

I guess I am going to have to us get granular in this text to connect us today. So let's go verse by verse. I want us to simply walk verse by verse through this reading. While you'll be able to follow along with me on the screen, if you want you can grab a bible from your pews and open it to page 118 or open a bible app or

go to [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com) to follow along if you'd like. Here we go, buckle up I'm gonna go fast. If you miss something, you can always go back and read or watch this sermon again on our website: [genevaumc.org](http://genevaumc.org)

***“In the first book, Theophilus,”*** so we stop right here in the middle of the first verse. Acts - sometimes known as the Acts of the Apostles - is the second piece of writing we have from Luke who authored the gospel of Luke. Now a thing or two that is important to know about Luke is that he's very meticulous. Luke captures detail and organizes it very neatly and with purpose. Some say that Luke is the most biographical of the gospel writers and so now in Acts, Luke, is starting to biography the work of the Holy Spirit. While I agree with that, I want to note that Luke isn't some newspaper journalist, simply trying to capture the facts of the story. Luke has more art and depth of meaning than simply capturing the facts. Luke is also looking for and seeking to convey abiding meaning in the way he captures his story. Luke's writing is for Theophilus. It's not clear who this person Theophilus is or his relationship to Luke. Different traditions have taught different theories on who the intended recipient is of Luke's two books, but nothing conclusive can be drawn about this person - other than Theophilus is translated from Greek as 'friend of God' so perhaps these two books from Luke are written to all those who seek friendship with God.

Next Luke continues to recap by saying, ***“I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.”*** So Luke already once wrote about how Jesus was taken up to heaven, but he's telling us again. This must be important. A clue to why Jesus' ascension in to heaven is import comes in verse three. ***“After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”*** It's important for Luke to record how Jesus was raised is because there are these really big questions... like 'if Jesus is alive, resurrected from the dead, where is he? How should I believe you that Jesus is alive, if he's not here?' Therefore to say Jesus is risen, means that he is alive. The first born of the new creation God is bringing about through him. Jesus therefore sits enthroned in this new creation. In essence, Luke is telling us that a new world order is coming - it's called the kingdom of God- and Jesus is king of that new order. Luke is preparing show Theophilus -and us readers- through these Acts of the Apostles that he has recorded how this new world order is starting to come to fruition today by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, Jesus' first marching orders in this new world order come in verse four when Luke writes, ***“While staying with them, he [Jesus] ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be***

***baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.***” So the promise that is coming is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is power. It is what empowers these disciples to do the 'Acts' Luke records in the following chapters of this book.

The Holy Spirit is what empowers us. Just as the Holy Spirit empowers these disciples of old to preach, heal, face persecution and trial, explore new places, meet new people, baptize, teach, share, live in community and more - so does the Holy Spirit empower us. But for the moment, in this part of Acts, the Holy Spirit has not come and so Jesus' disciples simply need to wait a few more days for the Spirit to come.

All of what has been written so far in these first five verses of Luke has been the recap of how Luke's first book ended. Now verse 6 is where the new material picks up. “So when they had come together, they asked him, ***“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”*** So here the disciples are with Jesus on day 40 post-Easter. Jesus decides he's going to take questions and they all have this urgent question on their mind “So is now the time you are going to restore the kingdom?” It's a good and fair question. I've often wondered that myself. “When are you going to come and bring this new kingdom God? We are tired of waiting for senseless violence to end. Our hearts are broken by death, when will you make good on your word and make death no more? When will you wipe away every tear, because pain suffering and death are no more? When are you going to make your dwelling place with us? If not, now, when? How much longer?”

Maybe it's just me, but I want to know if not when, but certainly if God is still going to make good on God's promises. Can God be trusted? So I understand the disciples' question, to which Jesus replies, “He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” Not a confidence building answer... and I think knowing this to be a response that is less satisfying to a genuine inquiry Jesus offers verse 8 as a word of consolation. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;” I like how Jesus decides to describe the Holy Spirit as power. Not just because the Holy Spirit brings power, but that because in the light of the suffering, struggle, pain and death that drive the question of wanting to know when all that stuff is going to end because God's new kingdom has come, we feel powerless. There is nothing we can do to stop death. Despite all our best interventions and security measures - those who want to enact terror will find a way to do so and we are powerless to stop all of it. So to get power in the face of such powerless situations is comforting and assuring. When that power comes from God - as a fulfillment of God's promises- then maybe God can be trusted after all.

As Jesus continues his response in verse 8, it turns out that power from God -in the form of the Holy Spirit- comes with responsibility. Jesus says ***“and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the***

***earth.” So here Jesus is charging us to simply not receive this power and feel good about it. Jesus is telling us, when that power comes that “its go time!”***

Luke is all about witnessing; which means giving an account of what you’ve seen or experienced of God. This account is to include both our words and actions as Luke will demonstrate for us throughout this book and as he demonstrated in his first book, the gospel.

Now, I want to be clear witnessing here isn’t trying to convince someone to change their mind. Witnessing isn’t about getting into a debate about who is right and who is wrong. In court, a witness is simply stating their experience of what they come to believe to be true. It is then up to the jury to decide the validity or believability of that witnesses' testimony in light of the whole facts of case. So when Jesus calls us to witness, we’re simply asked to give our account of how we’ve come to know God - letting the Spirit work on the recipient to see if that testimony impacts them. So witnessing -as Luke describes it- is more about what I have experienced or what I believe. Witnessing is NOT dictating what someone else should do or believe. Does that make sense? The Spirit empowers us to do our part and the Spirit works on others. Sometimes Christians like to do the Spirit’s work on others instead of letting the Spirit work on us. So I want to be clear on what I think Luke’s Jesus is ordering us to do here in terms of witnessing.

Also in verse 8, Jesus is also giving marching orders of where witnessing is to take place - and he evens put it in order. Jesus says to the disciples: witness in Jerusalem first. Jerusalem is home territory; place of comfort, minor leagues, places to practice. Luke records in chapters 1-5 of Acts the witnessing in Jerusalem and we will look at some stories from these chapters. But think about it. If we’re recipients of the Holy Spirit. If we are reading this text as ‘friends of God’ then these marching orders apply to us. Where is Jerusalem for us? Is it close to come that might be hard? It's with our Christian friends, learning how to tell our story and experience of God - perhaps that’s more comfortable and good practice before moving to where Jesus calls his followers next which is Judea - the surrounding countryside.

Judea is a place to test, grow, build confidence. Judea is on the edges of your comfort zone. Think about it: who can you share your witness with who you are confident would receive the message -or at least wouldn’t reject you, but would be a bit uncomfortable talking with about it, because it hasn’t come up before? Who came to mind... that’s your Judea.

Next Jesus says we witness to Samaria - the hated semi-foreigners living right next door. Samaria is a space of true challenge, but still close enough to receive support and rest. These are the people you’ve perhaps felt hostile to your word or seen them be hostile to others. Yeah. Jesus says we go to them too... but if we’ve been following orders it may be harder to go to the Judaea's and Samaria's,

but since we started in Jerusalem, then we've had practice and confidence. It's like going up against a better team that you've lost to before, but you've been practicing and think it might not be so bad this time. Luke records the disciples going to Judea and Samaria in chapters 8-12 in the book of Acts and we'll cover some of these stories this summer too.

Lastly, Jesus tells them to take their witness to the ends of the earth. These are places of uncertainty, excitement, danger, amazement, unlimited opportunity, strangers - it's the full adventure. Luke dedicates the last 16 chapters of this book of Acts to how the Spirit empowered the disciples to be witnesses in all of these types of places. Paul being one of the most widely traveled of the Disciples and we will spend a little time with Paul at the ends of the earth in this series in July.

Now in verse 9 is when the story gets harder for me to understand. ***“When he [Jesus] had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”*** I really don't know how to explain this. Other than to say this: In Jesus day, it was believed there were two realms. The realm of this earth - over which the kings and rulers of nations reigned and it was believed that in a separate physical space was the realm of God, where God reigns.

The promise of scriptures is the reuniting of the two realms into one realm where God reigns. To get to the realm of God you have to die, but Jesus had already died and is newly alive as a the first born of the new creation - which is the union of the two separate realms. So to explain how Jesus got to the realm of God the early church told this story of the ascension. Now we know what is up, and while it's pretty cool up there, our telescopes have yet to find a throne. So for me it's not important which direction or where this realm of God is. But it's important to me that Jesus is there and that he is the king of that realm, working on our behalf. Taking us to that place when we die.

Next, Luke narrates what the disciples decide to do after having this confusing ascension thing happen. ***“Then they [the disciples] returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. So the disciples do what they are told by Jesus. They go and wait back in Jerusalem. Where Luke tells us that 13 When they [the disciples] had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”*** Here is where I think

we find some good news, if you haven't received some already about the Holy Spirit giving us power, when we feel powerless.

The good news I see here, is that there is this liminal time - this in-between time- where the disciples feel all alone because they have no Jesus; no comfort, support, assurance from God; they have no Spirit yet. The power and the promise fulfilled hasn't come. I imagine the disciples feeling desolate in this space. But what do the disciples do while they wait, in this liminal - perhaps desolate- space? They gather together as the whole community and they pray. They pray deeply, continuously, with fervor.

When we're lost and alone or feeling like a sinking stone, then the community of disciples and believers gathers to pray as we wait for that power to come. We devote ourselves to prayer until God's promises are fulfilled, until we feel consolation and empowered, the good news is we don't have to be alone or without a prayer while we wait for God's promise to come to fruition. We can pray together. We have two prayer groups going right now. Tuesday is a traditional prayer group at 1pm in person or zoom and 1:30pm on Thursdays is a different prayer form called Centering Prayer. We also are happy to pray with you one on one and you can always stop and pray at anytime.

So that's how we're going to end this first foray into the Spirited Adventures of the book of Acts, with prayer. Please pray with me.

*Help us to release our anxiety to you, O God, so that we can receive the power of the Holy Spirit you set loose over 2000 years ago. Pour out your Spirit upon us that we might be filled, empowered and sent on your continuing mission today of spreading the good news as witnesses of Jesus Christ through word and deed here, near and far away, even unto the ends of the earth. Amen!*