

May 28, 2017
Easter 7
Ascension Sunday

“The Risen Savior Builds His Church Through Us”

ACTS 1:1-14

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ²until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 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. ⁴ On one occasion, 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. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

⁶ So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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.”

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ “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.”

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

Luke begins the Book of Acts with the words, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach.” Luke is referring to his former book, the Gospel of Luke where he wrote about the things Jesus began to do until that day when he was taken up to heaven.

If the book of Luke is about the things Jesus began to do and teach before he ascended into heaven, the second book of Luke, the book of the Acts of the Apostles is about what Jesus did after ascending up into heaven. In the book of Acts we see Jesus building his church through his disciples and ultimately through people like you and me. Jesus’ work of saving us is completed and finished. His work of building his church is ongoing. We are privileged to part of this amazing work in these last days.

He makes us resurrection people

The living Lord and Savior builds his church by taking people like us and turning us into resurrection people. That's what happened to the Apostles. It says, "After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive." For forty days Jesus appeared to different groups of people to show them he was alive. He appeared to Mary Magdalene on the day of his resurrection as well as the other women who came to the tomb, to the disciples on the way to Emmaus and then to the disciples hiding behind closed doors. At one time he even appeared to 500 believers at one time. He appeared to doubting Thomas and told him "Put your finger into my hands and put your hand into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

My dear Christians, by God's grace and mercy, you have become resurrection people. Jesus told Thomas, "Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen me and believed." All over the world people are being shown the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead, and they have come to believe that his resurrection really did happen exactly as the Bible tells us. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we can believe without a doubt that everything he tells us in his Word is true. Because we have seen the nail marks in his hands and the spear wound in his side, we believe and confess as Thomas once did that Jesus is our Lord and God. Because of the nail prints his hands that he purposely kept, we know beyond any doubt that perfect payment was made for every sin we have ever committed. We are resurrection people who boldly witness to our hope that Jesus will raise us up at the last day.

We are told that during those forty days before he ascended into heaven Jesus spoke to his resurrection people about the kingdom of God. In the book of Mark it says that Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Here it says that shortly before he ascended into heaven he spent time talking to his disciples about the kingdom of God. As resurrection people we know what our King did to rescue us and save us and we never weary of hearing about it. Colossians chapter one says, "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Jesus builds his church by showing people like us how he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness by his resurrection from the dead.

We are powered by the Holy Spirit

Jesus also builds his church by giving us the Holy Spirit in these last days. He told them in one of his last meals with them, "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 by the Holy Spirit." John the Baptist clearly predicted the Holy Spirit would come when he said, "I baptize with water for repentance. But after me will come one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Just as John poured water on people in baptism Jesus would pour out the Holy Spirit on people just as it had been predicted in the book of Joel.

How sad to hear the disciples didn't grasp fully what Jesus was telling them. They asked him, "Lord are at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" They could not get

this idea out of their heads that Jesus was going to establish some powerful kingdom here on this earth. James and John had once asked for a special position of honor in this kingdom which upset the other disciples.

We wonder how they could miss what Jesus was saying to them about building his church and bringing the message of the resurrection to people so they could be saved. But before we become too critical of these disciples for missing their main purpose in life after Jesus went up to heaven, let's take a more honest and realistic assessment of our own lives. We don't want to be uncomfortable in our Christian faith especially around people who don't believe. We prefer to have things go smoothly in this life before the Lord calls us home to heaven. But then the Holy Spirit messes everything up for us. He leads us to start witnessing to what Jesus has done and that gets us into trouble. Jesus never said take up your pillow or lounge chair and follow me. He called on us to take up the cross and follow him.

How does Jesus help his disciples who completely miss the point of what he tells them about the Holy Spirit? He tells them again how weak their understanding is about the kingdom of God and then he repeats to them how he will send them the Holy Spirit. "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 Holy Spirit is such a powerful force in your life and mine. How many times this past week has the Holy Spirit convicted you of some sin in your life? This convicting force of the Spirit is so powerful you realize you have nowhere to turn for help. You cannot turn to yourself. The Holy Spirit leads you to see that your only hope is in Jesus. As we sing in the hymn, "Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling. Naked come to Thee for dress, Helpless look to Thee for grace." There is a reason why we confess our sin together in worship here in this church. We are convinced we have fallen completely short of God's glory and there is nothing we can find in ourselves to save us. And the Holy Spirit who shows us our need brings us to Jesus so we can sing, "Living, loving, dying, rising, Jesus did it all for me,"

Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to share these same convictions with people who do not believe. Jesus builds his church by empowering people like us to boldly proclaim the need to repent and turn to Jesus before it is too late. . This is the important work that has not yet been completed. There is so much to do before the end comes.

We look for Jesus to return in glory

Jesus also builds his church in these last days by giving resurrection people like us who are empowered by the Holy Spirit a yearning and longing for his return. Look again at what the angels told the disciples as they were watching Jesus ascend up to heaven. "They were intently looking 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 up into the sky?' This same Jesus, who has been taken from you will come back in the same way you have seen him go up into heaven.'" The disciples saw their Lord ascend into heaven with a physical body. They saw him with their own eyes as they were intently looking up into heaven. Some day when Jesus returns we will see him with our own eyes

coming on clouds of glory to take us to the place he has prepared for us.

This summer, a little less than a hundred days from now, there will be a total eclipse of the sun passing through the center of our country from east to west. Whether it's an eclipse, or earthquake, or another terrorist bombing, or the love of many growing cold, or false teaching in the church, these signs are constantly flashing on and off like bright neon lights tell us Jesus could return at any time on clouds of glory.

What are the implications for building Jesus' church when his return could be soon? First, we realize that the time given to devote ourselves to the work of the Lord is very limited. What if this were the last week of life on this earth? How would that impact how I use my life to witness for Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit? Also this keeps us from being discouraged. Oh, how we love the words of the hymn, "And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, Steals on the ear the distant triumph song, And hearts are brave again and arms are strong. Alleluia! Alleluia!" We watch Jesus go into heaven and we cannot wait for him to return in glory.

We gather together for prayer

It is interesting to see what the disciples did after Jesus went up into heaven. It says that they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives where he went up into heaven. Then they went upstairs into the room where they were staying. And then it says, "They all joined together constantly in prayer." They were joined by the women who had faithfully followed Jesus and been with the disciples. Mary the mother of Jesus was also there, and the brothers of Jesus were also there as well. They joined together in prayer constantly.

When the Holy Spirit did come to the disciples on the day of Pentecost it says they were altogether in one place. What were they doing when they were together in one place, waiting for the Holy Spirit? They were together in prayer. Now that Jesus has ascended into heaven he is in a position of great power at the right hand of God. He wants us to come boldly before our heavenly Father and pray in his name. That's what the early Christians did in the book of Acts. That's what Christians are doing all over the world in these last days. That's what we are doing together as members of this congregation. That's what we do as individuals. The time to join together constantly in prayers is something we want to do today not tomorrow.

The work of saving us has been completed by Jesus. He told us then when he cried out from the cross, "It is finished." The work of building his church in the last days is not completed. With the prophet Isaiah we proclaim, "Here am I! Send me!" Amen.