

Sermon – August 27, 2023
“You will be my witnesses”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 1:6-14

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words. Make these words a blessing for your people. May these words ignite our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor as those sent into Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning! Welcome to the thirteenth Sunday in the season of Pentecost. I trust we are all seeking to open our hearts more fully to Holy Spirit's guidance as we come to the end of this season. Please keep our upcoming Good News Club in Northumberland Elementary School in your prayers as the volunteers are now planning and training for another GNC this fall. I will be preaching a series of sermons from Acts starting this morning and at least until Advent. We will look at one topic from a chapter each Sunday. Reading the book of Acts during the series would be a great way for each of us to connect more with the early church. Reading God's word will help us to be grounded in the text and better prepared to be guided by Holy Spirit as we journey together through this book of the Bible. During the time I will be preaching from Acts, Seedbed's Wake-Up Call will also be focused on Acts. I encourage us to listen to those podcasts or read the emails each morning as JD Walt will be digging deeper into the text than we will have time to do each Sunday. Let me encourage us to join the Seedbed Wake-Up Call and enjoy our journeys together through Acts as we seek to catch a glimpse of what the early church was

experiencing as they moved from Jesus' ascension to the coming of Holy Spirit and into the beginnings of the Church, the body of Christ on earth.

One of the first challenges we encounter as we move into the book of Acts is the ascension. Our text this morning gives the second account of the ascension in Luke's writing. The first was in Luke's Gospel, and in Acts chapter one, Luke writes about the moment in time when the followers of Jesus, who had over the last forty days become witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, witness his departure from earth to heaven. Luke is the source for our knowledge about when the ascension occurs, telling us it takes place forty days after the resurrection.

Think about the scene Luke describes. Jesus' followers have gathered outside of Jerusalem on a Sabbath and Jesus is present. There is one last question for Jesus from his followers, but it is a question which he does not directly answer but tells his followers instead that they are to receive power when Holy Spirit has come upon them and they are to be Jesus' "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."ⁱ As soon as Jesus has given them their commission, he is lifted or taken up and then a cloud blocks their view. The disciples are standing there looking up toward heaven at the cloud that Jesus has disappeared into and suddenly two men dressed in white show up with a message. We should realize these men in white are angels and they have been sent to Jesus' followers with a message. "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."ⁱⁱ These verses mark the ascension of Jesus. Keep in mind that Luke has been stressing that Jesus in his resurrected body has a physical presence. Jesus eats food with the disciples. Jesus offers the unbelieving Thomas in the upper room the opportunity to touch him. Jesus could not offer this if he did not have a physical body for Thomas to touch. The two men on the Emmaus Road are present for Jesus' breaking of bread. Luke tries to make it plain to his readers that Jesus has a physical body and it is taken or lifted up into heaven.

Don't be hard on the disciples for standing there and looking up into heaven where Jesus has gone. The cloud that blocks their site of Jesus is the Shekinah Glory of God. I think if we were witnesses to this cloud, we would also be found staring at the cloud that marks the presence of God. The angels clarify for us and the followers of Jesus present at the ascension that Jesus has been taken to heaven. I like to think about the ascension as N.T. Wright likes to express it: there is now a Jewish carpenter sitting in heaven at the right hand of the Father. Jesus, in his

resurrected physical body, is now seated at the right hand of God. Where is Jesus now? Jesus is sitting in heaven at the right hand of God, the place of power. Jesus is with God and is ruling and reigning in heaven. Jesus now exercises the power of God. All of the power of God is available to Jesus. When Jesus walked the earth, he healed, fed the thousands, and taught about the kingdom of God. Jesus was filled with the Spirit. After the ascension, Jesus is back in heaven and rules and reigns from there.

We also should understand that we as followers of Jesus have a connection to the ascended Jesus in the place of power in the kingdom of God. Jesus' last instruction for his followers was to wait in Jerusalem until they receive power. Jesus and the Father will send Holy Spirit, the promised Spirit spoken of by the Old Testament prophets that was to be poured out on all people. Believers in Jesus will receive Holy Spirit. And then notice in verse 8 what happens when believers receive power. They are to be Jesus' "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."ⁱⁱⁱ Verse 8 is a verse we might want to underline or mark in some way in our Bibles. If we are ever wondering about Jesus' plan and purpose for our lives, here it is in plain English. The next time we hear someone say, "I know Jesus has a plan for my life," we can point them to Acts 1:8. We are to wait until we receive power when Holy Spirit comes on us and then we are to be Jesus' witnesses, starting where we are and moving outward to the ends of the earth. Jesus goes from being in one place at a time on earth into heaven where his spirit is present in the hearts of believers through Holy Spirit and Jesus is now able to be wherever his followers are found, followers who are commissioned and empowered to be witnesses for Jesus to all people.

Before we leave the idea of Jesus being seated in heaven at the place of power, the right hand of God, we need to connect with another scripture. If you have your Bibles, turn in them to Ephesians 2 and let's look at verses 4-6. It is page 192 in the pew Bibles if you want to follow along in them. Let me read the verses, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ —by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,"^{iv} Did we catch Paul's words? Through the grace given to us by Jesus Christ through his suffering and death on the cross, we have been saved. And when we come to believe in Jesus, we are given Holy Spirit power and raised up with him in heaven and seated with him in the heavenly places. Where is Jesus? Seated at the right hand of God the

Father. Where are we when we believe in Jesus and receive Holy Spirit? We are on earth, but we are raised up with Jesus and seated with him in heavenly places. We have access through Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ who is seated at the place of power in heaven. When we wake up in the morning and thank Jesus that we have been given another day here on earth to be at work in the kingdom of God, we should recall that we have the power of a Jewish carpenter sitting at God's right hand in us strengthening us to be Jesus' witnesses where we are that day. That is far better than all of the coffee, tea, or caffeine that we will ever drink to get us going in the morning. We have in us the power of Jesus; who can stand against us?

Look at the second part of Jesus' commission to his disciples. We are back in Acts verse 8. The first part of the commission is "you will receive power when Holy Spirit has come upon you."^v But don't miss the second part of our commission. Jesus tells his followers, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."^{vi} We who believe in Jesus once we have received Holy Spirit power are to be Jesus' witnesses starting where we are in Burgess or Ophelia and moving outward to the ends of the earth. Jesus does not send out the early church to be disciple makers; they are sent out to be his witnesses. We are apostles, sent ones. Yes, when people accept Jesus as their Savior, we as those sent to them are to help them to grow in the knowledge and grace of Jesus. But we are to be those filled with Holy Spirit power and out witnessing for Jesus even to the ends of the earth.

We are Methodists and we have a great legacy of being witnesses for Jesus Christ. Methodists don't have the corner on witnessing among the many denominations, but it is a key part of our legacy. We have too long forgotten whose we are and what the one who bought us with his blood sends us out in the power of Holy Spirit to accomplish. Jesus' commission to his church, the body of Christ, is to be his witnesses right here right now, starting in this place and heading out to the ends of the earth. Let me share a short video that was shared with me that I think will help us begin to get back in touch with our Methodist heritage. We are to be sent ones who are out in the world being witnesses for Jesus. Watch this video and see if we can catch some of our heritage.

Example of Francis Asbury, <https://vimeo.com/583122293>

Our heritage as Methodists is for each of us to be Jesus' witness where we are and wherever Holy Spirit leads us. We are to be those filled with power through Holy Spirit, and in the power of Jesus, out on the Long Road sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. For those who

know the history of Fairfields, the beginning of this church is rooted in a wooded spot where Francis Asbury preached the Good News to a few who were gathered. And the fire of that proclamation of the Gospel has not gone out. When we look at our history, we recall our roots in Asbury's role as the prophet of the Long Road, a road that ran through this part of Virginia and gave birth to our congregation. But the real legacy we should be seeking to claim is to be like Francis Asbury and be prophets and prophetesses of the Long Road. Our desire should be to be those who are filled with Holy Spirit and out in the places Jesus is seeking for us to be at work as his witnesses sharing the love of Christ. Don't get the idea of witnessing twisted up so that what we are seeking to do is to be a witness about Jesus. What Jesus is calling us to do for him is to witness to others about the power, the love of Christ, that is alive in us. We have been moved from those who are dead to those who are now alive in Christ. We have been raised up with him and are seated in the heavenly places with Jesus. We are to be his witnesses right here, right now and move out as we are led even to the ends of the world. We are Methodists, those whose feet are made for the Long Road.

We might ask, "How do we begin to reclaim this aspect of our Methodist heritage?" or "How do we become witnesses for Jesus?" Let me point us this morning to Acts verse 14: "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer."^{vii} The first step is a move to prayer. The followers of Jesus who came back from the ascension spent the next ten days in the temple praising God or in their homes devoting themselves to prayer. Now I would like to call us to drop all of our plans and spend the next ten days gathered together, doing nothing but praising God and devoting ourselves to prayer together and in our homes. And while that is an interesting idea, I don't think that is what Jesus is asking us to do. We are to devote ourselves to prayer and to pray for revival, an awakening of our hearts, homes, churches, and country. What I have been learning from listening to those at the Asbury outpouring of God over the sixteen days this past spring is that we need to become open to lingering before God. Yes, we need to devote ourselves to prayer and we need to wait for Holy Spirit power before we seek to become one whose feet are out on the Long Road. Some of the students at Asbury lingered after the chapel service. They responded to God's touch and call to them to wait, to linger before Him, to be present and to listen for something more, to be open to receive something more, and they did simply linger in chapel that day. We need to be willing to simply sit here in our pews before God and wait until we are released. Maybe there is another hymn or praise song God is placing on our hearts to

hear. Maybe there is someone present who needs prayer. When God touches our hearts, we need to be willing to pray with and for each other over anything Jesus is placing on our hearts. We need to be willing and open enough to God's call that if we are out in the parking lot and we find our hearts stirred for something more, to return to worship and meet God and let Him address some unfinished business that He places on our hearts. We need to be open to turn around and come back into His presence and linger before Him that He might do a work in our hearts. We need to become aware of God's call to remain before Him and let Him finish the work He has begun in us even if it means coming back to the sanctuary on a Sunday afternoon and waiting for the move of Holy Spirit in this place. Yes, we need to be devoted to prayer, prevailing prayer that the disciples entered into when Jesus told them to wait until power from him arrived. Yes, begin to devote ourselves daily to prayer, but also seek to be open to times of lingering before God and letting Holy Spirit accomplish a greater work in us. We have one job to do, to be Jesus' witnesses in this place and then outwards to the end of the world. But we are to wait, to linger before God, to let Him fill us with His love before we are sent out to again walk the Long Road. Jesus does not tell his followers *maybe* you will receive power, but that they *will* receive power. We are to wait before God and pray to receive power when Holy Spirit comes upon us and then go out as those sent again to our own journey on the Long Road.

Pray with me. Jesus, we confess we are like those who look at the cloud of glory and forget we have one job to do for you. Lord, open our hearts to a desire to wait, to linger before you, and when we receive power, when Holy Spirit has come upon us, to be those who joyfully return to the Long Road that we might be witnesses to others for your love living in us. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

ⁱ NRSV Acts 1:8

ⁱⁱ NRSV Acts 1:11

ⁱⁱⁱ NRSV Acts 1:8

^{iv} NRSV Ephesians 2:4-7. Bibles, Harper. NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3450).

^v NRSV Acts 1:8

^{vi} NRSV Acts 1:8

^{vii} NRSV Acts 1:14