

Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday May 16, 2010

Luke was a physician who wrote two books of our New Testament—The Gospel According to Luke, as well as The Acts of the Apostles. Today’s readings overlap somewhat, as they are the very end of Luke’s gospel, and the very beginning of Acts. These writings describe the close of Jesus’ post-resurrection encounters with the disciples, his final instructions and blessings for them, and then his ascension into heaven. Knowing that the disciples would be in kind of a ‘holding pattern’ as they awaited the Holy Spirit, Jesus made sure that they would have a clear sense of their mission. This made the days following his ascension into a time of preparation and growth for the disciples, rather than just another time of waiting. We, too, have received these blessings and instructions from Jesus, which provide us with the strength and the power and the purpose to carry on Christ’s mission in the world today. Let’s take a look at the actions Jesus took on behalf of the disciples, and at the promises he made to them...

“He opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” That promise is for us as well. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth, “Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny. “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.” For certain, portions of the scriptures can be confusing or challenging—but we have been given the power to understand them! Page 1

That does not mean that we will always come to such understanding easily. It requires much prayer, study, listening and discernment, and communication with other believers in order to achieve a mature understanding of the various parts of our scriptures—but, like the earliest disciples, we are called to work toward gaining that understanding so that we may grow in faith and share it with others.

Jesus reminded the disciples that they were witnesses to the events of his suffering as the Messiah, and of his resurrection on the third day. As witnesses of these things, they would be sent out to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to all nations.

We, too, are witnesses to these events. Those first disciples, witnesses such as Luke, the holy scriptures, and an unbroken chain of Christians who have shared this experience with one another across the centuries have allowed us to know and believe in those events as surely as if we had stood at the foot of the cross, at the mouth of the cave where the stone was rolled away, and on the beach where the Risen Christ shared breakfast with his loved ones. When we combine the gifts passed on to us by the original witnesses with the mind of Christ as we delve deeply into God's word, we become equipped to go out and proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to all nations in this day and age.

In both Luke and Acts, we read of Jesus' requesting that the disciples remain in the City of Jerusalem until what he referred to as "sending upon you what my Father promised"; being "clothed with power from on high"; and "being baptized with the Holy Spirit". Jesus told them that this would take place "not many days from now". Their lives with Jesus had been so filled with surprises, unexpected events, seasons of wonder, and moments of fear that surely they did not know what this promised event would be like. But it sounded as though it would bring strength and power and hope for whatever lay ahead.

According to Jesus' parting words to the disciples, they would be Christ's "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And then Jesus lifted up his hands and blessed them in farewell and in preparation for the mission that he had just described. This was a commission of a very grand magnitude. To be witnesses to Christ's love and grace 'to the ends of the earth' includes a great deal of distance, time, and individuals. And, as we know, the scale of this mission has multiplied exponentially over time, meaning that we have an important call to continue the work that those first disciples began. Yet we, too, have been blessed by Christ to serve as witnesses to the faith, to reach out to all the nations with the same open-armed, open-hearted love that he shared with his first disciples and all those who encountered him during his earthly life. We, too, are disciples—called, blessed, and commissioned. **Page 3**

In the midst of blessing them, Jesus “withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven”. In Acts, we read that, “as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight”. As this occurred, the disciples stood watching, gazing up toward heaven even after Jesus was out of their sight.

Isn't that what we would do? Continue to keep our eyes focused on the last place we had seen Jesus? Not quite ready to end this post-resurrection period of meetings, instructions, and promises, wouldn't it be hard to tear our eyes and our hearts away from Christ's vanishing physical presence, in order to turn to the daunting mission that lay ahead?

We can't fault the disciples for lingering there, clinging to the last bit of familiarity. For their lives were about to change yet again...

What happened next is reminiscent of the scene on Easter morning, outside the tomb, where the angels asked the women why they were looking for the living among the dead. For, as the disciples continued to gaze into the heavens (although Jesus was no longer visible there), “suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 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.”” This would have been exciting news—the idea that Jesus would return again at some time. It would have made it a bit easier to move forward with the mission at hand.

Luke tells us that “they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God”. Strengthened by Jesus’ blessing, empowered by the promise of the Holy Spirit, and of Jesus’ eventual return, the disciples were suddenly ready to move forward, even if it was into a ‘holding pattern’ as they awaited the coming of the Spirit. At that point, they knew what they were to do during this interim time—they were to rejoice in Christ’s love and grace and to gather in continuous worship.

Those disciples knew that the Holy Spirit was coming—fairly soon, though they knew not exactly when. We know that we will be celebrating Pentecost next week—remembering the coming of the Holy Spirit to the people of the early church and recognizing with joy the presence of that same Spirit within our church and in each one of us. Which means that the week ahead is an excellent time for us to reflect on and rejoice in the grace and love of Jesus as we worship corporately and individually. Can we spend the week to come in the same way that those first disciples did following Jesus’ ascension into heaven—continually blessing God?

Can we devote the next seven days to cultivating a renewed awareness of God’s presence in our midst, and to expressing our gratitude to God through prayer and action? Rather than merely marking time on the calendar, noting that Pentecost is coming, can we use this time to prepare our hearts to receive the Spirit anew? 5

I wonder if doing so would make a difference in the way we understand and celebrate Pentecost?

I wonder if doing so would make a difference in the way we navigate our journeys of faith in the year ahead?

I wonder if doing so would deepen our relationships with the Risen Christ?

I wonder if doing so would give us stronger motivation and greater ability to live and serve as witnesses to God's grace and love?

There is really only one way to find out! And that is to begin right now, by committing ourselves to a week of living as Jesus' disciples, not in a 'holding pattern' between Sundays or holy days, but as believers who are eagerly and actively awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The guidelines are right here for us in today's scriptures, as we have already discussed...

--We have the ability to understand the scriptures. In the week ahead, shall we commit to a daily reading of today's passages, and the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit as described in the first 21 verses of the second chapter of Acts?

With each reading, we can pray for new insights and deeper understandings of the gift of the Holy Spirit to those early Christians and to us.

--We are called to live as witnesses to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, to his love and grace offered to all humankind. In the week ahead, can each of us make the time to read through the story of Jesus' last days, from the Last Supper through his resurrection? Choose to read from whichever of the four Gospels you wish, each one offers a slightly different viewpoint of the events that took place.

As you read an account of Jesus' death and resurrection, place yourself within the scene, as a witness, absorbing all the sights and sounds and feelings you become aware of. Allow yourself to be present to what Christ is experiencing, so that you will be able to share your insights and your faith with others.

--Like those earliest disciples, Christ offers us blessings of grace and peace, equipping and empowering us to live and serve as bearers of the Good News of resurrection hope. In the week to come, let us make a special effort to open our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our hearts to receive Christ's unique blessing for us. And then, let us consider these blessings and the specific ways that they invite us into relationship with the Risen Christ and with one another.

Recognizing these blessings will open the way for us to express our gratitude to God in a deep and significant way, through the ways that we live out our calls.

Pentecost is coming, no matter what we do,

whether or not we prepare.

We can choose to stand gazing up toward the heavens,

bewildered and uncertain,

Or, we may choose to accept our invitation to serve as active disciples of the

Risen Christ, called, blessed, and commissioned

to live and share the love and grace of the Gospel with all nations...

for all God's people.

Which will you choose?

Amen.

Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Acts 1:1-16

In the first book, Theophilus, 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. 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. 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 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."