

Christ's Powerful, Joyful Witnesses  
Luke 24:44-53  
May 12, 2013

*He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

Grace, mercy, and peace from our ascended Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Today, in our worship, we are celebrating the ascension of our Lord; the ascension that took him physically from this world; the ascension that put him in his rightful place, seated at the right hand of God in all power and majesty. So, today, we are going to look at the effect that our Lord's ascension had on the apostles' lives and the effect that his ascension should have on our lives.

Christ's ascension signaled the beginning of a new era in the lives of the disciples. School was over. It was now time to stop being full-time students and start being full-time teachers. When Jesus returned to heaven, the responsibility of bringing the truth of God's Good News for sinners became the disciples one and only assignment.

It's no accident that, at the moment of his ascension, Jesus speaks to the disciples about witnessing. Jesus was leaving them physically, but he wasn't abandoning them. Jesus remained with his disciples through his Word, his Spirit, and his blessing. Jesus left those disciples behind and he has left us here to be God's powerful, joyful witnesses.

The problem with witnessing is that it is often seen as an awkward, joyless task. Of course, we know that some people must witness in order for the church to move forward – some people but not everyone – certainly not me. Often, we try to witness using our own limited resources, based on our fluctuating emotions, relying on our own programs or strategies, or depending solely on sociology or demographics.

And, just about as often, these attempts fail because we want to do things our way and not God's way, or we want to spread our message and not God's message, or we want to witness to attain our goals and not God's goal. If we witness our way and not God's way, we will always have the wrong starting point, or we'll send the wrong message, or our witness will lack power, or, worst of all, our witness may lack God's blessing.

To avoid these pitfalls, we need to examine today's Gospel reading so we can get the proper perspective on witnessing. Like the first disciples, we need to take our witnessing instructions from the Lord. Today's text gives us four guidelines for successful witnessing.

First, to be the powerful, joyful witnesses God intends for us to be, we must, like the disciples, begin in the right place. Jesus told the disciples to return to Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. In our reading from Acts, we hear Jesus tell the disciples they will be his witnesses: *in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*

(Acts 1:8 NIV).

Jesus told those disciples to begin their witness in the very place where the most important act in all of history took place – in Jerusalem. It was Jerusalem that God chose as his holy city. It was Jerusalem that God chose to be the site of the yearly sacrifices for the sins of his people. And it was Jerusalem that God chose to be the place of the ultimate sacrifice – his one and only Son. Jesus told those first disciples to begin their witness where it all began – in Jerusalem.

We have the same mandate to begin our witness where it all began; not at Jerusalem, but at the cross. Our message begins at the place where Jesus gave his life to cover the sins of the world. Our message to the world is a simple one – repentance and forgiveness. It's not complicated. It doesn't involve a complex system of rules and regulations; a list of the do's and don'ts to work your way to heaven.

Our witness is to the truth about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It's this wonderful truth which we have been given to pass on. And this is the only message we have been given to pass on. No where in the Bible will you find orders to construct high-powered evangelism campaigns. No where in the Bible will you find orders to develop a new message. We are told to be witnesses of the cross, and that witness is all that is needed. We just need to get busy and do it.

The second guideline for a powerful, joyful witness is to witness according to the Word of God. What I mean by that is to witness using the Word of God. The Word of God was all those first disciples needed and it's all we need. The Word of God is complete and completely self-sufficient. Without any additions or subtractions, the Word of God tells the entire story of God's love for mankind and his plan for their salvation. The Word of God is the only word you need for a powerful, joyful witness.

However, the best tools in the world are of no value in the hands of someone who isn't familiar with them. If the automatic transmission of your car was broken and I gave you all the tools needed to repair your car's automatic transmission, do you think you could do the job? Of course not. Why? Because before you could do the job you would have to go to school to learn about automatic transmissions.

You need to know all about a tool before you can use it. Jesus knew this principle and he knew it applied to his disciples. To fully expound on what the Scriptures had to say

about Jesus, the disciples needed a fuller understanding of the Scriptures. Our text tells us that Jesus: *opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures* (Lk 24:45). Jesus gave them the ability to read the Scriptures and understand how all of it pointed to him and his work of salvation.

We are no different. Our most powerful witnessing tool is the Word of God. But we can't use a tool we're not familiar with. Too many Christians profess to "know the Bible" but have only a nodding acquaintance with it. Like the disciples, our minds have been opened to understand the truth of Scripture. But that opening has no effect if we aren't spending time in Scripture.

The truth of the Bible will not magically float from the coffee table to your brain. You must actually take your Bible in hand and don't just read it – study it. And to really enhance your study, try studying the Bible with other Christians, like we do here every Sunday morning.

The third guideline for powerful, joyful witnessing is to witness by the Spirit. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he knew that the job of evangelizing the world was beyond the power of this ragtag group of witnesses unless they received some help. And help is exactly what Jesus sent them. When the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, a miraculous change took place.

Remember the disciples who ran when the soldiers showed up in Gethsemane? Remember the disciples who were hiding behind locked doors on Easter morning because they were afraid of the Jews? Well, a memory of those men is all that was left after the Holy Spirit showed up. Those timid disciples were now fearless, powerful, joyful witnesses to the salvation which Christ bought and brought.

We, the witnesses of today, have that same Holy Spirit. The Spirit that came to the disciples on that first Pentecost is the same Spirit that comes to us. Now, the Spirit doesn't normally come to us in a rushing wind. Instead, the Spirit of God enters us through God's Word and the sacraments. The world might see these as weak and ineffective means, but in his letter to the Romans Paul calls the Word of God: *the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes* (Rom 1:16).

The Holy Spirit within us gives us the power to witness. Jesus told his disciples not to worry about what to say when they are brought before kings and authorities because the Spirit of God would supply the right words.

That's good advice for us. Don't worry about what to say to your unbelieving friend, neighbor, or relative. Just let the Spirit of God work through you and you will accomplish more than you ever thought possible. It's God's Spirit that makes our witness effective.

The last guideline for a powerful, joyful witness is to witness with blessing. Before Jesus ascended he blessed his disciples. This blessing had a tremendous effect on them. Luke tells us that, after Jesus had ascended, the disciples: *worshiped Jesus and returned*

*to Jerusalem with great joy* (Lk 24:52). Jesus blessed these disciples and they knew that in that blessing they had everything they needed.

We, too, have this blessing from our Savior. We have his consolation that we have not been left here on our own. Jesus has promised to be with us to the very end of the age. We have his blessing and his abiding presence in our lives. The blessing of Christ on our lives means that our witnessing will be blessed and we, in turn, will be a blessing to others.

If we try to witness with our own methods and ideas, our witness will fail. If we try to witness to a message other than the love of God for mankind and the truth of the cross, our witness will fail. If we try to witness for any purpose other than our Lord's mandate to proclaim the truth of the Gospel for the salvation of the unbeliever, our witness will fail.

To be powerful, joyful witnesses; we must start at the beginning with the message of the cross; we must witness using the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation to point to the Savior; we must witness by the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through us and by letting the Spirit control our witness and; we must witness with the joy of knowing that God blesses both us and our witness to bring about his holy Will.

I pray that God, our Father, will make all of us witnesses of the cross, by the Word, in the Spirit, and with his blessing.