

The disciples had a daunting task in front of them. Their group was so small and the world was so big. But on his Ascension Day Jesus gave them some promises to strengthen them and equip them for their task. In our passage tonight we see Jesus give his disciples three Ascension Promises: 1. “You will be my witnesses.” 2. “You will receive power.” And III. “Jesus will come back.”

The first promise is “You will be my witnesses.” Jesus says, **“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8)**. A “witness” is someone who sees something and then tells what they have seen. What had the disciples witnessed? What had they seen? They had seen Jesus alive. Our passage says, **“After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3)**. The disciples had seen Jesus alive and Jesus gave them the commission to tell other people that Jesus is alive. Why is it important to tell other people that Jesus is alive?

Well, ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin, the human race by nature has been living under the tyranny of sin, death, and the devil. It’s important to tell people about Jesus because people who do not believe in Jesus are living under that tyranny of sin, death and the devil. That’s why Jesus talked to his disciples about the *kingdom of God* and told them to proclaim the kingdom of God. Our lessons says, **“He spoke to them about the kingdom of God.” (Acts 1:8)**. The kingdom of God breaks the tyranny of sin, death and the devil. People are living under the tyranny of sin. They have the guilt of sin. Their thoughts and actions are sinful. But the kingdom of God breaks the reign of sin. Jesus death on the cross has paid for all our sins. And so Jesus told his disciples in our Gospel: **“Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:47-48)**. On Pentecost, Peter told the people, **“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38)**. Being Jesus’ witnesses is important because people need to be freed from the guilt and power of sin by repenting of their sins and trusting in Jesus for forgiveness.

The kingdom of God also frees us from the tyranny of death. Jesus is alive. And everyone who believes in Jesus will live forever too. On Ascension Jesus told his disciples that they would get to be witnesses and tell people this good news.

But being a witness for Jesus is a difficult task to do and so Jesus gave them another promise on Ascension Day. He said: **“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.” (Acts 1:8)**. Jesus promised to send them the Holy Spirit to give them power to be witnesses of Jesus. People say, “Well, I can’t be a witness for Jesus. I’m just an ordinary person.” But Peter and Andrew, and James and John were fishermen. They were ordinary people. Granted, they had three years of personal training from Jesus. But you know the message: “Jesus died for your sins. Believe in him and you will be saved.” You can share that message with your friends and neighbors.

Or some people say, “I’m too afraid to be a witness for Jesus.” I understand that. Peter was also afraid. He was so afraid that he denied Jesus three times. But, you know, not long after Pentecost Peter stood right in front of the same people who had put Jesus to death and Peter said, **“You crucified Jesus of Nazareth but God raised him from the dead. ... Salvation is found in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:10-11)**. There’s quite a difference between Peter on Maundy Thursday evening denying Jesus three times and Peter here boldly proclaiming Jesus.¹ How did Peter get the power to be so bold? Well, it says a few verses earlier, **“Then, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to**

¹ I owe this insight to MLC Professor Mark Paustian.

them.” (Acts 4:8) It was the Holy Spirit who gave Peter the power to be so bold and Jesus promises that same Holy Spirit to you so that you can have the boldness to be a witness for Jesus.

The third Ascension Promise was actually spoken by the angel. The third ascension promise is that Jesus will come back. Our passage says, “**After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight**” (Acts 1:9). This must have been quite a sight to see. Jesus could have simply disappeared. But instead he went up into heaven. And it says, “**They were looking intently 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 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.’**” (Acts 1:10-11) That’s the third ascension promise: Jesus will come back. And in the meantime we have the task of being his witnesses so that more and more people can join us around his throne of glory in heaven.

And as we do that task Jesus promises to be with us. When Jesus ascended into heaven his visible presence was removed from us, but Jesus is still with us. Remember Jesus promised his disciples, “I am with you always, even until the end of the world.” (Matt 28:10) So even though we can’t see him Jesus is still with us as we carry out his mission. We can see in our passage that Jesus is always with us as we carry out his mission. Our passage says, “**In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach**” (Acts 1:1). The former book is the Gospel of Luke which talks about Jesus life and death and resurrection. But here it says, that’s what Jesus *began* to do and to teach. And that implies that Jesus is still doing and teaching things right now today. But he’s doing it through his Spirit as we carry out the commission to be his witnesses. That’s what the book of Acts is about. It’s about Jesus from his throne in heaven sending his Spirit and directing the spread of the Gospel throughout the whole earth.

Our reading today is from the beginning of the book of Acts. By the end of the book of Acts the Gospel has reached all the way from Jerusalem to Rome. Here’s how the book of Acts ends: “**For two whole years Paul stayed there [in Rome] in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ – with all boldness and without hindrance**” (Acts 28:30-31). So Acts begins with Jesus talking to his disciples about the kingdom of God, (“**He spoke about the kingdom of God**”) (1:3) and it ends with Paul proclaiming the kingdom of God (“**He proclaimed the kingdom of God.**”).² So on this Ascension Day take some time to thank Jesus that from his throne in heaven he directed the spread of the gospel so that the kingdom of God also reached you. The kingdom of God has freed you from the tyranny of sin, death and devil. Thank God for that on this Ascension Day and ask God that he would make us his witnesses so that his kingdom would set more people free. And we can be confident witnesses because we also have his ascension promises: “You will be my witnesses.” “You will receive power.” And “Jesus will come back.” His ascension promises strengthen and equip us to be his witnesses. Amen.

² I owe this insight to a New Testament scholar named NT Wright.