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**The Acts of the Apostles**  
**XXVI. The Story Is Still Going On**  
**Acts 1:1-11, 26:12-23**

Dr. William P. Seel  
Easley Presbyterian Church  
Easley, South Carolina

*“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up . . .”* That opening verse of Acts reminds us that the book of Acts is Luke’s sequel to his Gospel. But if Acts is the sequel to Luke, what is the sequel to Acts? And the answer is: you are, I am – all who belong to Jesus Christ in this present moment, we are the sequel to the book of Acts. The story of the Acts of the Apostles is still going on. Because the Holy Spirit is still being given to believers. Because the church is still the Body of Christ in the world. And because the instructions Jesus gave to His first disciples on that day of His ascension are still in force for His disciples today.

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* *“You will be my witnesses . . .”* In the other passage we read this morning, what do we find Paul doing – as we have seen him do so many times before? He is witnessing to Jesus Christ, telling the story of what Jesus had done in him and was now doing through him. Paul, here in these last few chapters of Acts, is on his way in chains to Rome – at every stop a new trial, and thus at every stop a new chance to bear witness to a new crowd about Jesus, to tell them about the good news of the Gospel, to share with them what Jesus had done in his life. *“In this connection I journey to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests,”* Paul says to King Agrippa while on trial in Caesarea:

*At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”*

And the story goes on from there – Paul witnessing before king and court about what Jesus had done.

Well, how about us? What has Jesus Christ done in our lives? What is the difference that He has made in our living? What is the story we could tell of the mighty acts of God in our own experiences? And are we willing to testify to all these things before others? To tell others the good news of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ as it has come into our lives? *“You will be my witnesses,”* Jesus said to those first disciples. And *“You will be my witnesses,”* Jesus is saying still

to us today – to us who are now His disciples. The story is still going on. And the mission of the Acts of the Apostles is not yet complete. *“You will be my witnesses . . .”*

I think of something Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans which really drives home the importance of our witnessing to Jesus in our own time and place. In chapter ten, verse thirteen, Paul writes these famous and beloved words to the Romans: *“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*<sup>1</sup> But what is often not read along with that verse is what Paul says next. Listen carefully, for he is talking about those who have not yet called upon the name of the Lord and so been saved:

*But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*<sup>2</sup>

*“You will be my witnesses,”* says Jesus to us still, in this on-going story of the acts of His disciples – *“You will be my witnesses.”* Because without our willingness to tell others about Him in our own day, to testify about what He has done for us in our lives, then how will those in this day who have not yet heard the Gospel – how then will they ever hear? How then will they ever be saved? *“You will be my witnesses”* – you and me and all who belong to Jesus – *“You will be my witnesses”* in this present moment of the ongoing story of God’s great work of salvation.

So, again, what has Jesus Christ done in your life and mine? What is the difference that He makes in our living? What is the story we can tell of the mighty acts of God in our own experience? And are we willing, like Paul, to heed Christ’s call and to testify about these things before others?

And, of course, it is not just witnessing that Jesus asks of His disciples both then and now. Throughout the book of Acts we have also seen the disciples working for Jesus, doing good works in service to others for the glory of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Not just witnessing to Jesus with their words, but also working for Jesus with their very lives. And what we have seen – and see, in fact, throughout Scripture – is that working for Jesus means, first of all, letting Jesus work in us. To let His Holy Spirit and His Holy Word change us, transform us into His image and likeness. Henri Nouwen writes of this challenge from Jesus to His disciples:

*Indeed, to live a spiritual life means to become living Christs. It is not enough to try to imitate Christ as much as possible; it is not enough to remind others of Jesus; it is not even enough to be inspired by the words and actions of Jesus Christ. No, the spiritual life presents us with a far more radical demand: to be living Christs here and now . . .*<sup>3</sup>

That challenge sounds hard, sounds very hard to us – and it would be, were we not given the Holy Spirit, just like the first disciples, to work that transformation in us. And we meet evidence of the Holy Spirit to do just that in us, not just in the book of Acts, but in the pews of this very congregation. All around us is the evidence of how the Spirit can work in a person open to and

devoted to Christ. In fact, some of those around us this morning the Spirit has already made into mature saints for us to learn from and imitate.

But, of course, not just Christ working in us, but also Christ working through us in our daily lives, using us to bring His blessings to other persons. I love this story from the early church, the fourth century. In the fourth century, a young Egyptian peasant by the name of Pachomius was abducted by Roman soldiers and forced to serve in the Roman army. While waiting for transport up the Nile, Pachomius and the other conscripts languished away in a Roman prison. But each day, local Christians visited the prison with food, water, and other supplies to care for these men.

Pachomius was puzzled by this. He asked the jailer who these people were, and was told that they were Christians. *“What is a Christian?”* asked Pachomius. The jailer said, *“They are people who bear the name of Christ, the only begotten Son of God, and they are merciful to everyone, including strangers.”*<sup>4</sup> They are merciful to everyone, even strangers! That’s what Christians do, as they work for Jesus. As Jesus has brought grace into our lives, so we work to share His grace into the lives of others: *“They are merciful to everyone, including strangers.”* By the way, under this theme of the story still going on, Pachomius, because of that encounter with the kindness of Christians, not only converted to Christ, but also become one of the founders of the great monastic movement of the Christian church.

But here’s an example closer to home about Christians working for Jesus. I came across this story years ago, but was thinking of it lately in response to all the division and anger and hatred and just plain loneliness loose in our culture today. Christian leader and teacher Dieter Zander tells of moving into a very mixed, pluralistic neighborhood in San Francisco. Around them, in that neighborhood, lived an atheistic Jewish family, a Buddhist family, an Irish Catholic family, a gay couple, and a Hindu family. There was, needless to say, no sense of community and little neighborly interaction.

So Zander and his wife set out to change all that. They decided, in their words, to become “conduits of the kingdom,” by practicing Christian hospitality towards their neighbors. They learned their neighbors names. They introduced neighbors to one another. And slowly life in that neighborhood began to change. After they had been living in that neighborhood for a while, Zander and his wife were approached one day by their atheist Jewish neighbor, who said to them, *“You know, something has happened since you all moved to this neighborhood. It’s hard to describe, but it’s like an enzyme has been added. Where once there was no life, now there’s life. What is that?”* And Zander answered, *“That’s the gospel of Jesus being lived out in our lives.”*<sup>5</sup> We are, in our day, as part of the ongoing story of Acts, those who witness to Christ. But we are also, in our day, as part of that ongoing story of His disciples, those who serve others in the name of Jesus – *“They are people who bear the name of Christ, the only begotten Son of God, and they are merciful to everyone, including strangers.”* The story of the Acts of the Apostles is still going on.

Which brings us to one last bit of what it means to be the disciples of Jesus in this day, the ongoing heirs of His great commission, as well as the continuers of the good works of His disciples in every age. After Jesus has given that instruction regarding the mission of the apostles and the coming of the empowering Holy Spirit, He ascends into heaven before their very eyes. They are

still staring up into the clouds, when suddenly two angels appear beside them and say to the disciples, “*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*” The meaning of this announcement from the angels, at that particular moment, is quite clear: “Don’t just stand there, He’s given you work to do – get busy!”

But I wonder if, in our current chapter of this ongoing story, if we are not being invited instead actually to take the time, from time to time, to stare up into the heavens – to look up to whence Jesus has gone and from whence He will one day come again? That as the first disciples were told to wait for Jesus to restore the Kingdom, it is just as important in our day for us to watch for the Kingdom. To look up into heaven from time to time just to remind ourselves, amid this world as it still is, that Jesus really is still in control. That Jesus really will one day come again, just as He has promised. That Jesus really will one day establish His Kingdom of grace, love, and peace just as surely on earth as it is already in heaven. To look up so that we can, in our chapter of the story, remember who He is, as well as what He has promised us.

Because life in this current chapter of the ongoing story can make it hard for us to remember these things. Eugene Peterson once gave a wonderful analogy of this. He tells of walking down a beautiful beach just after sunrise on a beautiful day. Birds and breeze and the sound of the waves all around him. All this beauty enfolding him. But as he walked further, he came across a bulldozer busily clearing logs and driftwood off of the beach. That in itself was not so remarkable; instead, what struck him was that a crowd had gathered to watch this smelly, noisy bulldozer at work. All around them was the great beauty of the shore and sea, and they had chosen to spend their morning watching a bulldozer. And for Peterson this symbolized how the world draws our attention downward, away from Jesus and on to lesser things, often the noisy and smelly things of this world.<sup>6</sup> And thus this act of watching for Jesus, waiting for Jesus, occasionally lifting up our eyes to heaven precisely in order that we might remember what is really real about this world of ours. To remember Who is really Lord of lords and King of kings.<sup>7</sup> And to remember, above all else, the hope He has given to us of the Kingdom which He shall bring, when at last the story comes to its end.

And maybe also just simply look up and watch for Jesus, from time to time, so that we don’t forget everything He revealed to us about what our God is really like, everything He revealed to us about how our God feels about us. I came across this in a book I was reading a good while back – I immediately marked it because I knew I was going to have to share it with you one day:

*No one has ever seen God . . . God is invisible . . .*

*But despite his invisibility, we know that God longs to be known. Throughout the centuries he has gone to great pains to reveal himself – in visions, images, angelic visits, dreams, soft winds, thick clouds, burning bushes, columns of smoke, a donkey and, of course, audible speech. His sheer creativity in revealing himself shows us just how much he longs to be known.*

*And this great longing in God had its ultimate culmination in a seemingly small event.*

*A baby was born. The baby cried and had rashes and spit up and giggled and learned to walk. But this fleshy baby had something in it other than milk and cries and soft coos: all of the fullness of the invisible God dwelt within that soft skin . . .*

*Jesus of Nazareth, the small-town carpenter, was the very flesh of the almighty, eternal, invisible God . . .*

*And as Jesus walked upon the earth, every decision he made, every lesson he taught, every conversation he had tells us about God. His posture, his manner of heart, his attitude, his outlook, his pace, his emotions, his death – all reveal God.*

*Every square inch of everything Jesus ever did speaks of God.<sup>8</sup>*

The angel fusses at the disciples for looking up when there is work to be done. But maybe, in relation to our witnessing to Jesus and working for Jesus in this ongoing story of the Acts of the apostles, maybe we need from time to time to look up for Jesus, to remember Jesus, to be renewed by His promise to us that He will come again – the very reason why our witnessing and working for Jesus is so important in the first place. Because He doesn't want anyone, not even one, to miss out on the joy of that day when His Kingdom comes. And because He doesn't want anyone, not even one, to miss out on the joy of that blessed ever after which will follow.

The story of Acts is still going on – it is being written right now in and through our lives as the disciples of Jesus, as we witness about Him and as we work for Him. But one day, one day, the end of the story will come. And we need to look up now and then to heaven to remember that. For the story of the Acts of the Apostles will end in the way that all good stories must end: with all wrongs forgiven and made right, with all loves reunited and perfected, and with everyone overcome by joy. The sort of joy that is meant when we say, at the end of the story: “And they lived happily ever after.”

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 10:13.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 10:14.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Maxie Dunnam, *The Workbook on Becoming Alive in Christ* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1986), p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> “The Apprentices,” *Leadership*, Vol. XXVI, No. 3 (Summer, 2005), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Wisdom of Each Other* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> I Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14, 19:16.

<sup>8</sup> Don Everts, *God in the Flesh* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), pp. 13-15.