



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

You Will Be My Witnesses

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ MAY 21, 2023

This past Thursday was designated as Ascension Day. It is the day we remember and celebrate the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven, so **ascension** is our subject for today as it is revealed to us in the Book of Acts, chapter 1, beginning at verse 6.

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸But 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.” ⁹And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and said, “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.”

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot

and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

Acts 1:6-14 (ESV)

Scripture teaches us that the Apostles were privileged to witness many amazing things. They followed Jesus around for three years and saw some extraordinary miracles right before their eyes, any one of which would have been so overwhelming that even the slowest among them had to know that something was happening that had never happened before. As Nicodemus said when he visited Jesus late at night, *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him”* (John 3:2). There is a saying that seeing is believing but, *“Did I just see that?”* The twelve saw Jesus walk across the water in the Sea of Galilee. They watched Him stand up in a boat amid a raging storm, hold up His hands, and tell the storm to be calm, and the storm dispersed. In Mathew 8:27 they asked, *“What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”* They watched Him raise Lazarus—a man who’d been dead for days walked out of the tomb! He went into the room of a young girl who had died, took her by the hand, and she got up and started walking around. He healed multitudes of all types of afflictions—people who were lame, blind, deaf, or had leprosy. Just by saying a word or touching them, He healed them of their afflictions.

Peter, James, and John went up the mountain with Jesus and got a glimpse of Him in His glory as He was transfigured before them. They saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Best and most important of all, the man that they knew and who they saw killed and put into a tomb, was now alive! He was resurrected! They saw Him, they touched Him, they heard His voice, and they ate with Him. But Jesus had one more amazing thing for them to see before He sent them off on their mission.

Luke gives us this seemingly straightforward story—so full of meaning and rich in blessing—in the Book of Acts. First, Luke tells us that

the disciples all came together with Jesus on the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives is just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem. The Garden of Gethsemane is located at its base, and a remnant of the garden remains today. Jesus went there to teach and to pray. Today, a tower commemorates Jesus' ascension into heaven from the top of the hill. His disciples had gathered around Him there to ask questions as Luke recorded in Acts 1:6. *"So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?'"* Why would they ask that question?

The expectation was that when the Messiah came, He would reestablish the nation of Israel. He would make it secure and there would be an era of peace. He would restore the monarchy, and the people would live in peace for many years. That, of course, would necessitate booting the Romans out of the Middle East. Jesus' revelation of His meaning of "kingdom" was far greater than that. It was far beyond simply the overthrow of Rome. It was to be a spiritual kingdom, culminating in not simply reestablishing the nation of Israel but by establishing a **new** heaven and a **new** earth we can't even imagine because everything would be so different! Everything would be new! Jesus promised that these disciples would be empowered not for military conquest or for political power or an earthly conquest, but to spread the Gospel. This is still the church's primary mission. It is not to prevail over people, but to point them to Jesus and spread the Gospel so that everyone will know who Jesus is. It is not the church's job to change the culture. It is our job as a church to change **unbelievers** into **believers**, and to reach sinners who will then go out and change the culture.

Jesus admonished the disciples for asking about something they were not meant to know. In verse 7 *"He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.'"* It is for God to determine times and seasons. John Calvin wrote that we should not be fussy about the things that God chooses not to reveal, but make sure we fully embrace and understand what He does

reveal. God will reveal things **if** He wants **when** He wants and in the **way** He wants. He is Sovereign. We get impatient with God. We have questions, we experience things, we discover things, we pray about things, and we want our answers now!

As Abraham and Sarah learned, it is never a good idea to try to get ahead of God. In their old age, they had been promised a son. But time passed and there was no child, so they decided to help God out. Tradition at that time was that if a man had relations with a servant that child could be accepted as his heir. After the child Ishmael was born to the servant Hagar, Sarah bore the promised child Isaac, and the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael have been in enmity ever since.

Sometimes we are mystified when things don't happen the way we want or when we want. We must accept the fact that sometimes there are factors we know nothing about or that do not even involve us. Several years ago, a gentleman came into my office who had gone from a total unbeliever to a mighty man of God. Watching his spiritual development right before my eyes was a miracle. He said, "You know, Pastor, I am so excited about the Lord, and I have grown so much in the Lord. I have so much love in my heart that I want to share my life and my involvement in ministry with someone." He was looking for a wife. He continued, "I just can't seem to meet anyone." I said, "Well sir, I am no prophet, and I don't know the mind of God, but has it occurred to you that maybe God has already picked out someone for you to spend your life with, but you may not be ready for her yet and she may not be ready for you. In fact, it is possible that she may not even be in Florida; she may be as far as the West Coast somewhere with no thought of moving to Florida. Trust in the Lord's timing as you continue getting to know Him better."

About seven months later, he came back to my office and said, "Pastor, do you remember the conversation we had? Well, a few months ago I met a very sweet young lady. We've gotten to know each other, and we are now seriously talking about getting married. And do you remember what you told me? Do you know where she

was seven months ago? She was in California with no plans to move to Florida.” How amazing! I’m very pleased to say that they had an absolutely wonderful marriage together.

We often do not know what will happen. This fellow and I had focused on Psalm 40:1, *“I waited patiently for the Lord; He inclined to me and heard my cry.”* Two words make this very difficult: “waited” (it is hard to wait) and “patiently.” Patience comes from trust and recognizing that our life is in His hands, and He will work out His purpose at a moment in time as He sees fit.

Look at the first half of verse 8, *“...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you....”* In other words, they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to fulfill their ministry. Next week we will celebrate Pentecost. Pentecost was when the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples, enabling them to fulfill the ministry to which Jesus was sending them. He had told them that they were to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth, but they wondered how they were to do that. How were Galileans supposed to speak to the people of India, for example? The Holy Spirit **empowered** them to speak in other languages; they didn’t study to learn other languages—they were empowered with the knowledge. All those who were in town to celebrate the Pentecost feast wondered how it was possible that the Galileans were speaking in the languages of people from around the world and had the power to perform miracles to confirm that message. Some who did not recognize the languages thought they were drunk!

It is important to remember that earlier Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem.

He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’

Acts 1:4-5

In other words, as they heard in the Upper Room, they must be “filled” before they moved on. They must be empowered before they attempt what they were being called to do. He knew they would be excited and want to rush out and tell everyone after having seen the risen Lord, but without being equipped they would fail. How often have good folks with the best of intentions started to do something too soon? Either it’s not time or they themselves are not ready or equipped. We might wish for something, and we want it now, but we really are not ready—it is not time.

I remember as a music student when I still had the delusion of someday being a professional musician. I studied and often attempted to play pieces that were much too difficult for me. I was excited about studying a great piece, and I would put my heart and soul into it, but I was not ready. I did not have the technique and it was beyond my ability. All my excitement, enthusiasm, and hope turned into disappointment and frustration to the point that I admitted defeat.

But Jesus said the Holy Spirit was going to empower the disciples very soon and then they would be able to begin their work as God’s instruments. What was that work? Verse 8 continues, “...*you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” How disconcerting the scope of their calling must have sounded to them. They must have thought, “First Jerusalem? You want us to preach here? This is where Jesus was crucified! Judea? We’ve already been rejected there. Samaria? What do we do with ‘those’ people, those half-breeds? To the ‘ends of the earth’? Do you mean to the Gentiles? How are we supposed to get to the ends of the earth?”

Notice the circle expands. It starts locally in Jerusalem. Our mission field begins right in front of us. It is very easy to assume that mission means going to Africa or Asia or some far-off land. Sometimes it does. This congregation had the joy of commissioning and sending the Kim family to Thailand. But it starts in our own sphere of influence; our mission field is right in front of our eyes. It includes faraway places—the early church even reached the emperor’s household—but it also

includes those who may seem out of reach and people who may seem unsavory to us. So, the question for us, metaphorically, is: “How far are we willing to go for Christ? What risks are we willing to take for Him? Even if we are not called to go all the way to Thailand like Su Kim and his family, right in our own sphere of influence how far are we willing to go?”

We also find in Scripture that God empowers the most unlikely people in the most unlikely ways to become conduits of great power—God empowers **all** His people. In the Book of First Corinthians Paul says that everyone has a spiritual gift or gifts for building up the Body of Christ. I encourage you not to be surprised with what gift He empowers you. Imagine if everyone in the church—not just this church but all churches—endeavored to discover their own divine spiritual gift from One Almighty God. Paul says that everyone has at least one gift designed to build up the Body of Christ.

As an example, when I was the solo pastor of a small church and about to begin a Sunday service, a young lady walked in looking totally distraught; she had obviously been crying. She sat through the entire service with her head down, and I thought to myself that I must give my heart and soul to the message. We sang old favorite hymns that day, and the choir had an excellent anthem prepared, so we knew we were equipped to really minister to this lady. At the end of the service, I greeted everyone as they left. Finally, near the end of the line was the young lady grinning from ear to ear. I welcomed her, told her how glad I was that she had come to worship and that I hoped she had found it to be meaningful. I told her I could not help but notice when she came in that she was upset but now she was smiling so I asked what had happened. She said, “Well, Pastor, I must admit that I did not hear a thing during the entire service. Did you notice where I sat?” I answered, “Yes, you sat by Mrs. Byrd.” She answered, “Exactly. When the service was over, Mrs. Byrd talked to me for a few minutes, and then she prayed, and now I know that everything will be fine.” Mrs. Byrd had the spiritual gifts

of prayer and encouragement, and God used her at that moment to change the woman's life. Everyone has at least one spiritual gift, if not more, so assume that you have a spiritual gift and then identify that gift.

The Apostles were given the privilege of witnessing something incredible. They watched Jesus being lifted into heaven. It says in verse 9, *“And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”* They saw Him bodily ascend just as they had witnessed Him bodily resurrected. He remains with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that He would be with us to the close of the age. Since He went up to heaven, how could He do that? He does that in the person of the Holy Spirit which means that He is with us now in this room; He is in this church; He is sitting next to you. No matter where you go, He is with you to guide and teach you. He is here to reveal, He is here to admonish your conscience which might lead to repentance. He is here to strengthen, to provide, and to protect.

It has been suggested that we compare this to something in our modern court system called the “witness protection program.” Out of concern for their safety prior to testifying, very valuable witnesses in a court trial are protected. In other words, they hide until their time to witness. Jesus does not want us to hide. But right after the crucifixion the disciples hid in the Upper Room and were protected by the Holy Spirit until they were empowered to witness. He does not want us to hide any longer, He wants us to go out into the world—not to be **of** the world but **in** the world with the protection of the Holy Spirit. As a result, the Church never needs to fear faithfully carrying out the mission and to persevere in the Christian life because someone greater than us and greater than any challenge is directing human history as He works out His purpose.

I know at times we get the impression that evil is getting the upper hand. We look around the world and see the moral decline and the violence, and it's easy to become discouraged, but we must remem-

ber what our Lord Jesus said after Peter declared in Matthew 16:16, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” to which Jesus responded in verse 18, “...*on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*” When we get discouraged because we think evil is getting the upper hand, we must remember Jesus’ promise and His declaration. He has already won the victory, and when He returns the victory will be consummated. We may be concerned, but we need not fear. The gates of hell will not overwhelm or overcome the church. The apostles watched in awe as Jesus was taken up to heaven.

Another amazing thing: In verses 10 and 11 we read,

And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said “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...”

They were told that Jesus would return the same way He left, bodily, on the Mount of Olives. And when He does, as we know from Scripture, every eye will see Him. He will come with the trumpet sound; He will make all things new; justice will finally be established and there will be no more death or crying or pain on His holy mountain.

My friends, it is so important that we talk about this because this promise must always be a part of our understanding of human history. This must be part of our understanding of putting human life, including our own, in proper perspective. The promise that Jesus will return is not a myth. It is not a dream. It is not a fairytale. It is a promise! That is why the church does what it does—we are confident that He will return.

After they saw this tremendous sight, the Scripture says the Apostles went back to Jerusalem and to the Upper Room and prayed: “*All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer...*” (Acts 1:14). Did they pray that the Holy Spirit would hasten to take hold of

them? Were they praying for Jesus' return to come quickly? The text doesn't say, but it does say that they were devoted with one accord.

God decides times and seasons and what He will do, but it is interesting that throughout history whenever there has been a profound outpouring of the Holy Spirit that transformed communities, churches, nations, and whole people groups, it was preceded by groups of faithful Christians earnestly praying for it. Because of the discipline of fervent and consistent devotion to prayer, they were prepared for the power when God chose to give it. An outpouring of the Holy Spirit will upset things. Life will not be the same. We may like life the way it is and not want it to be interrupted, but when we pray earnestly for the coming of the Holy Spirit, we prepare ourselves to be ready to receive what God has chosen to give.

I exhort all of one accord, as individuals, small groups, and a whole church, to be earnestly devoted to prayer and to pray for revival. May we continually and sincerely plead with our heavenly Father to grant us an outpouring of His Spirit. It is the only way that our wounded, broken culture can be transformed. That we may, to His glory, proclaim to this hurting, broken, and sinful world the greatest gift humanity has ever received—the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!

From this passage, we first learn that we must trust the Lord enough to wait patiently for Him. Second, we must trust that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live the Christian life and be in ministry. Third, we are called to discover our own unique spiritual gifts and to live them out by building His kingdom. Fourth, we are to be His witnesses wherever He sends us and with whomever He places in our path. And finally, we are to stay faithful to our Lord and Savior, for when He returns, He will make all things new, and we want to be found in Him when He does! ■