

## Witnesses to the World

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, May 21, 2023.

Luke 24:44-53  
Acts 1:1-11

As you just heard, the book of Acts begins like this: "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."

The "first book" to which the author of Acts refers is the gospel of Luke, which also begins with an introductory note addressed to Theophilus: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by witnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."

The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are intended to be companion volumes and, consequently, are sometimes referred to together as "Luke-Acts." Biblical scholars believe that they were written by the same author sometime between 80 and 90 C.E. Neither book says anything explicit about the author. Tradition holds that the author was a colleague of the apostle Paul named Luke, referred to in the letter to the Colossians as "the beloved physician." Whether or not this is true, what we can say with confidence is that both books are written in the same style and both are addressed to Theophilus, a name that means "lover of God." It could be that these two books were both written to an individual by that name. Or it could be that the two books were intended for anyone and everyone who considers himself or herself to be a lover of God. In either case, whether intended or unintended by the author, we now have the privilege, as lovers of God ourselves, of reading these two books centuries after they were first written.

In the beginning of Acts, we hear how the resurrected Jesus, after his final appearance to his disciples, departed from them -- how he was "carried up into heaven." This is known as the Ascension of Christ, and, like the resurrection, it is one of the great mysteries of the Christian tradition. I don't find it helpful to think of it in literal terms. What I do take from it is that Jesus' early disciples experienced his resurrection initially in profound and immediate ways. And then, shortly thereafter, their experience of the resurrected Jesus changed. It became qualitatively different. No longer did they refer to Jesus appearing before them. Rather, they wrote about Christ living within them, about their living in Christ, about their community of believers being the body of Christ. At some point, the resurrected Jesus left his disciples and returned to God. That event is depicted as the Ascension. Following the Ascension, the disciples are baptized by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, giving them spiritual power from God.

What I want to focus on this morning is Jesus' instructions to his disciples, at the very beginning of Acts, just before he departs from them. "You will be my witnesses," he tells them, "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Here the book of Acts begins where the gospel of Luke leaves off. At the end of Luke we read: "Jesus 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.'"

Jesus' disciples are witnesses to the world. The book of Acts tells the story of the early disciples traveling far and wide to spread the good news of Jesus, the Christ. They risked their reputations. They risked their fortunes. They risked their very lives to tell the story of Jesus and his love for all people. Some of them were imprisoned. Some of them were killed. But it is thanks to those early disciples that we know who Jesus was and what he did and taught. It is thanks to them that we have a New Testament, a collection of their testimonies about Jesus' life and teachings and their experience of him.

This idea of Jesus' disciples being witnesses makes me recall my experiences in court. Many of you I am sure have served on juries. Some of you may have sat in traffic court waiting your turn to protest

a parking ticket. Others may have participated in a trial as a plaintiff, a defendant, or a witness. I've sat in a courtroom several times in the last several years, and I must say that I have gained more of an appreciation for our judicial system. Yes, the system has its flaws and it is terribly overloaded. But, at the same time, I have been impressed by the integrity of the judges who sit in their courtrooms each day hearing case after case and doing their best to make fair and impartial judgments. I have been impressed with the time and care I have seen judges take with each defendant to ensure that each person knows and understands his or her rights. And I have been impressed to see a judicial system in action, which presumes that anyone accused of violating a law is innocent until proven guilty.

Witnesses give testimony. They swear to tell the truth about what they saw and heard – the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Their testimony is treated as evidence and is weighed with all the other evidence in a particular case before a decision is made in favor of the defendant or the plaintiff.

Jesus' early disciples were witnesses. They gave testimony about what they saw and heard. And fortunately some of their testimony was written down in, to paraphrase Luke, orderly accounts of the events just as they were handed on to us by witnesses and servants of the word so that you might know the truth. It is thanks to the early church that we now have a record of testimony -- a New Testament -- which we can read for ourselves and reach our own decision about what we believe really happened so many centuries ago.

Indeed, the New Testament is our primary body of evidence for knowing who Jesus was and who Jesus is. Without it his story would probably never have survived across the centuries. In our ordination vows we refer to the New Testament, along with the Old, as “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal and God’s word” to us.

We, too, are called to be witnesses, to tell the story of Jesus and his love – to our children and to our neighbors. We are Jesus’ 21<sup>st</sup>-century disciples. If we don’t tell Jesus’ story today, who will? No one else is going to do it for us. It’s up to us as Christians to pass on the Christian tradition from one generation to the next.

A good place to start is for us to reflect on our own experiences of being disciples. What has it meant for us to be followers of Jesus? What difference has Jesus made in our lives? Why do we come here to church? What draws us to St. Andrew? What value or meaning do we find here for our lives?

Perhaps we're here because we have found that through Jesus we feel closer to God. Perhaps we're here because following Jesus helps us become better persons. Maybe Jesus' life and teachings inspire us to help make the world a better place. Or maybe we are here to be part of the supportive, caring community that is the body of Christ. We are here because God in Jesus Christ has touched our lives in some important way. We are here because this church has met some spiritual need in each of our lives that was not being met elsewhere.

The question, then, is why keep it a secret? Why keep it to your self? There are millions of people out there who want to feel closer to God, who want to become better people, who want to make the world a better place, who want to be part of a supportive, caring community. If they only knew where to look! If they only knew we were here! So, why not spread the word? Why not tell your family, your friends, your neighbors, why Jesus is important to you and what being part of his church has meant in your life and what it could mean in theirs? Give them an open invitation to join you. Share with them the good news of God's unconditional love. And let them know that they are always welcome at St. Andrew.

Of course, even more important than what we say is what we do. Actions speak louder than words. Perhaps you've seen the T-shirt with words attributed to the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Christian mystic, Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." We say much more with our actions than with our words. As Christians, we testify to Jesus and his love in how we live our lives. May we do so with integrity, in truth and love, so that others will know who Jesus is and will want to follow him, too, as we do. Amen.