

## **EASTER 2 - ACTS 1:1-14 - APRIL 7**

### **You Shall Be My Witnesses**

Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and ascension hit his followers while they were processing his death and resurrection. But, in time, after experiencing Jesus' departure, they were filled with a new joy and purpose.

With the second Sunday of Easter, the Narrative Lectionary moves from the Gospels, Mark specifically, to the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts begins by looking backward to Luke's account of the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. Although there are a host of literary indications that Acts is the continuation, or perhaps Volume 2, of Luke's Gospel, there is little evidence that early Christians read Acts in connection with Luke.

Nevertheless, there is a significant overlap between the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. Luke provides three richly detailed accounts of Jesus' resurrection. There is the first story of the resurrection revealed to the women who come to prepare Jesus' body. That is followed by Jesus' appearance to the two disciples walking to Emmaus. Finally, Jesus appears to the gathered disciples.

In contrast to these rich accounts, Luke concludes with a very brief account of Jesus' ascension. Acts picks up where Luke ends, providing a summary account of Jesus' resurrection appearances and focuses instead on the ascension. Despite some discrepancies between the two, most obviously the length of time between the resurrection and ascension, the end of Luke and beginning of Acts can be treated as one single event.

Despite the two previous reports of Jesus' resurrection, Jesus' appearance to the apostles caused fear and terror, although this might have been more of a startle response, than fear itself. Jesus responded to their fear by showing them his physical body.

The apostles' fear morphed into a mixture of disbelief, joy, and awe, which reminds us of Matthew's description of the disciples' post-resurrection worship and doubt.

Jesus followed this with a reminder of what he had said previously about his death and resurrection as well as opening their minds to Scripture. Eventually, after his ascension, this disbelief fully transformed into great joy and worship, but it took a while.

Jumping back to Acts, we find that the apostles are still struggling to understand what is going on. Even after weeks of “convincing proofs,” they still don’t get Jesus and their soon-to-be-true mission.

Acts also sets the stage for the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. As important as that moment is, the Spirit has already played a significant role in the story of Jesus. Luke, in ways that are often unique to Luke, makes it clear that Jesus’ ministry is soaked in the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit comes upon Mary in the story of Jesus’ conception. The Spirit descends on Jesus at this baptism; Luke tells us that after his baptism, Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit leads him into the wilderness where he experiences both temptation and sharp engagement with Satan. He returns from the wilderness, “in the power of the Spirit.” When Luke records Jesus preaching in Nazareth, the first text Jesus reads says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, anointing me to preach good news to the poor.”

Whatever else we want to say about Jesus’ ministry, Luke reminds us repeatedly that it is soaked in the Spirit. There is no gap between what Jesus is doing and saying and what the Spirit of God wants.

If a tree is going to grow strong and tall then it must establish a strong root system. As we begin our journey through Acts, we will see the roots of the newly planted church reaching deep into the soil. Jesus is the key to this whole operation. Not only is he the planter of the seed, he is the seed and the soil as well. The church is planted in the truth about who Jesus is and why he came. The disciples were called to be witnesses to the resurrection. They were commanded to take this good news to the entire world.

In order for this sapling church to accomplish the mission for which it was sent, it had to be firmly rooted in three things: Power, Proclamation, and Presence. Without the Power of the Holy Spirit, they were nothing; just a sapless, lifeless stick of wood.

Without the Proclamation of absolute truth that is found in the person of Jesus Christ, there is no mission at all. Only through the life-giving Presence of an authentic community in the world would the love of God and the Good News of Jesus have a vehicle through which to be delivered.

Inside of a single seed, there lies all the genetic information to produce a gigantic living tree. Even more amazing is the fact that, from that one seed, hundreds, even thousands more seeds can be produced. Jesus planted the seed of His kingdom into the hearts of his disciples. The disciples asked Him if he was going to restore the Kingdom to Israel at this time. Everyone - the people in the story and readers, - expects God to do something: to clothe Jesus' friends with power and to call them into action. The apostles also understand the messianic import of what lies ahead; their question to Jesus about the restoration of Israel is perfectly reasonable. The Messiah is expected to purify the land and rule over the nations ... Is this finally the time?

Notice how Jesus did not answer them directly. His silence was as if he said, "Hello! Have you not been walking with me and listening to my teaching for the past three years? Yes I'm going to restore the Kingdom, but not in the way that you or all the other Jews think. I am, through you, going to restore the Kingdom of God as it was originally designed ... for the whole world. You don't understand this yet, but when the Spirit comes into you on a permanent basis, he will help you discover that you will break the boundaries of race, language, and creed. You will be my witnesses to the entire world.

The seed looks small and unimposing in the beginning. It even lies unseen for a season as it spreads roots. But then, given the proper environment, it bursts forth into a dynamic living organism, the roots of which are strong enough to break up

a concrete foundation. As we journey through the book of Acts, we will watch this sprout start tiny with the disciples, then only 120 people, incubate for a while in Jerusalem, and then burst out into the entire world, spreading its branches for all to see and participate.

At this point in Acts, the resurrected Jesus also begins to prepare his followers for his departure. He assures them that although he will not be with them, the Father has promised to send the Spirit, inviting them into their own Spirit-soaked ministries.

Perhaps they were still confused by Jesus' commission when an even more confusing thing happened: Jesus' ascension into the clouds. That is a lot to take in. Jesus just told them about some sort of baptism by the Holy Spirit, whatever that meant, and that they would be travelling far and wide for their commission. Now, he just flew away ... flat-out vanished! It's a bit of an unfair criticism from the angels, the men in white robes: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

Because something completely out of the realm of physical possibility - and just as unexpected - happened. Because they just lost their rabbi and friend - again. They were in shock, unable to process what was going on. Of course, they would be standing and staring.

One way of thinking about the ascension is that it removed Jesus from the scene, allowing the Spirit to take centre stage. While the ascension may accomplish something like this in literary terms, it is important to remember that, rather than introducing the Spirit, Acts picks up where Luke left off, reaffirming that Jesus taught his followers what the Spirit commanded him to teach.

There is neither difference nor competition between the work of Jesus and the activity of the Spirit. This promise begins to take form at Pentecost in the next chapter of Acts which will be read at Pentecost in a few weeks. Luke's Gospel presents Jesus' Spirit-soaked ministry; Acts begins both by affirming this claim about Jesus' ministry and by beginning to describe how this ministry will continue

in the lives of his followers.

Over the forty days after the resurrection, Christ appears to his followers, preparing them to receive the promised Spirit and “speaking to them about the kingdom of God.” In response to this, the disciples ask if Jesus is about to “restore the kingdom to Israel.” In all the Gospels, we see that Jesus’ teaching about the reign of God has always been open to nationalist interpretations, longing for the restoration of Israel’s golden age, whenever one thinks that was. Moreover, both at the end of Luke and here in Acts, the promise of the Spirit is tied to receiving “power.” It is understandable that the disciples would equate this with political power, the power to compel others.

But rather than preparing the disciples for political power, the Holy Spirit will turn them into “witnesses”. This witness includes, but is not limited to, the boundaries of Israel. Instead, it “extends to the ends of the earth.” Here, as in Luke, the redemption of Israel that is accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is ultimately directed toward the blessing of the nations, toward drawing all the world to God. Israel’s redemption opens the world’s salvation. Such a message requires witnesses, not rulers.

The disciples seem reluctant to give up their nationalist dreams, they are also slow to take up their role as witnesses to the ends of the earth. Perhaps these are connected. Going to the ends of the earth means giving up a particular vision of what the restoration and reconstitution of Israel might entail. Rather than securing and protecting the boundaries of Israel, under the Spirit’s guidance the renewal of Israel leads to its expansion, drawing the nations to God.

Here, Acts, the apostles’ emotional state is not described when they returned to Jerusalem as was the case in Luke’s Gospel. Probably, they were unusually quiet, with perhaps some murmuring. They went back to where they were staying. And what they did next was perhaps the only thing they could do, while they waited for Jesus’ most recent promise to come true: constantly devoting themselves to prayer.

Within Jerusalem, the disciples are bold proclaimers of the good news, powerful prophetic critics of the religious leadership, and leaders of a dramatic movement within the city. They show little interest in expanding this mission beyond Jerusalem. The disciples only leave Jerusalem on pain of persecution after the death of Stephen later on in Acts. Further, as the next chapters indicate, expanding their witness to Gentiles is a distressful matter. The centrifugal work of the Spirit overcomes the centripetal inclinations of the disciples.

Both Luke and Acts indicate that there is no difference or competition between the work of Jesus and the leading of the Spirit. That is not as clear when it comes to the disciples. Their embodiment of the Spirit's prompting is more hesitant. Their aims and hopes are less fully aligned with the Spirit's. The story of Acts reflects this ongoing work of the Spirit to reform and shape the wills and actions of the followers of Jesus, conforming them ever closer to the desires of God.

It can be hard for us to fully empathize with Jesus' apostles and disciples at this point in the story. After all, most of us are familiar with the story, and anyway, it's something we read in a book or hear in a sermon. It is not something we are experiencing first hand.

But we do have experiences that we have a hard time understanding, or that are shocking and maybe even our-world-changing. Just like it took time for the apostles to process and move forward, it will take time for us to do the same. And yet, they can be good role models for us. We, too, can spend our processing time in prayer.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere — in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The witnessing begins in Jerusalem, and is to spread to the ends of the earth. This is actually a fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham. It was promised that he would be the father of many nations, like the stars in the heavens. He and his

descendants were to be a blessing to all nations. The disciples will be witnesses when the Holy Spirit comes. We could say that they will be a blessing to all nations.

The presence of God is acting in us and with us. The disciples were expecting and looking forward to the restoration of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Jesus was promising them a Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, not Jerusalem. Jesus had no intention of the restoration of Israel.

During the Ascension, the disciples are shown Jesus ascending bodily. The Holy Spirit is the power of Jesus at work in the disciples. The Holy Spirit was at work in Saul, who upon finally believing in Jesus, became Paul.

The Holy Spirit pushes boundaries, and this includes us. In the Kingdom of God, there is no room for nationalism. We need to learn to disregard the concept of nationalism. Our communities are expected to live and become a people of God - not of a nation or country or special or separate group.

The Holy Spirit will transform all of us. We can't claim God for our side. Tell that to some of the competing sports teams. We can't equate God with a political agenda, although, as we have seen, political parties keep trying to do this.

As Christians, we are expected to be counter-cultural, just as Jesus and the disciples were. That starts at home for the disciples, in Jerusalem. From there they were directed to cross their enemies' borders or boundaries, which in this case was Samaria. This is something that Jesus did when he asked the woman at the well to give him water. After all, Samaritans were their enemies. That is probably why he told the parable of the Good Samaritan - to show that they were not the enemy or bad guys. They were all part of God's new Kingdom. Next on their agenda was Judah and finally the ends of the earth which, probably, for the disciples, was the Roman Empire.

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between the work of Jesus and the leading of the Spirit. That is not as clear when it comes to the disciples. Their embodiment of the spirit's promptings is more hesitant. Their aims and hopes are less fully aligned with the Spirit's. The story of Acts reflects this ongoing work of the Spirit to reform and shape the wills and actions of the followers of Jesus, conforming them ever closer to the desires of God.

According to Jesus, the specific shape of the kingdom is not predetermined. It will grow organically as disciples - then and today - wait upon God, pray, and respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit to live with love, kindness, and mercy, always looking towards justice and peace, to emerge as the beautiful fruit of the kingdom of Jesus.

**Amen.**



## **PRAYERS FOR EASTER 2 - APRIL 7, 2024**

Gathered together we bring our hopes and dreams, our prayers and petitions, for the world, for all Creation, and for all in need.

Loving God, in these early days after Jesus' resurrection, we wonder what it all means. We can relate to the women who fled the tomb with terror and amazement. We understand the fear and confusion that kept the disciples in the shadows. We find ourselves in the eternal movement between fear and faith, doubt and conviction, wonder and worry. Yet, we trust that you love us deeply and are present with us in all circumstances.

Holy Creator, the earth receives your promise of new life: seeds die to bear fruit and plants decay to nourish the soil. Renew and restore all living things as you intend. Open our eyes to see and appreciate the abundance of water and nourishing food you provide. Help us to work together so that all have access to clean water and adequate sources of food.

Today, in the grace of being Easter people, we pray for those who are supported by your grace alone in the turmoil and oppression of war, terror, famine, drought, prejudice, bigotry, social injustices and the misuse of power.

Giver of peace, when you make your presence known, you do so by offering peace. Bring such peace to peoples and nations ravaged by war, violence, and natural disaster, especially: HUALIEN, Taiwan, which experienced a 7.2 magnitude earthquake, the worst in 25 years; HELSINKI, Finland, where a school shooting killed a 12-year-old boy and injured others. The shooter believed to be a 6th grade student; BEIJING, China, which experienced rare storms and typhoon like winds since March 31st that have killed at least 7 people; HARARE, Zimbabwe, where drought conditions have caused Zimbabwe government officials to declare a national disaster as their country needs more than \$2billion in aid to feed millions facing hunger; RAFAH, Gaza Strip, where the bodies of 8 foreign World Central Kitchen workers killed in Israeli air strike are on their journey home.

Across the World, we pray for the rights and safety of all individuals regardless of race, beliefs, sexual orientation or identity; for all lives suffering the devastation from war or natural disasters; and so much more.

Wherever homes are disrupted by anger and bitterness, and wherever relationships are strained, dysfunctional, and dulled, bring wholeness, peace

and harmony. Wherever young people are gathered in your name, visit and guide them with your holy Word and give them wisdom.

Visit and comfort the sick and suffering too, dear Lord. Heal and strengthen weak bodies, calm and heal confused minds. We pray for those we know with particular needs. Be with those known to us whom we now name in our hearts. We pray for healing for Ron Nelson. Support all with your great love and mercy.

Even as the machines of greed and war trample the world and its peoples, we remember that there are seeds of justice and love and goodness and grace that are planted and watered every moment of every day. Across the World, we give thanks to all the “guardian angels” who selflessly and continuously give to others without even so much as a thank you. We may not know them by name, but with certainty we give thanks for their many unselfish acts of service, their words of loving kindness and gifts of charity and hospitality. We give thanks for those who: - rise early in the morning to prepare food at countless soup kitchens around the world; - search the night streets for lost children and shepherd them to places of safety; - keep watch amidst the sick and dying in countless hospitals and in countless places; - speak words of compassion and love in the face of hate. We also give thanks for all the blessings, milestones and special occasions that give us reasons to celebrate.

Be with your church throughout the world so that its preaching and works of love may continue to testify to our Lord’s resurrection. Be with our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, the Moravian church, all pastors and lay workers and leaders, musicians, missionaries, and diaconal ministers. Today we uplift Dunbar Lutheran in Vancouver; our BC Synod Staff and Synod Council; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara. God of resurrection, strengthen and equip pastors so that they may listen well and share the good news of the Gospel with Christ’s authority.

Fill our hearts with joy and gladness as we remember those who have died believing in life in your name. Reveal to us the joy of your salvation even in the face of death.

O God, in a world that at times is confusing, complicated and frightening we pray that you will strengthen us and keep us grounded in your powerful love. Equip us so that we might stand and bear witness to this whole life, the life of the Risen One, Jesus Christ Our Lord. May we be able to share the deep truths about this life: that Love is stronger than hate; Life has the final word over death; Beyond what we can see with our eyes there is a strong bond of love that draws and keeps us together. Help us to live in the grace of being Easter people, knowing we are saved and cherished.

Christ is risen! Christ is alive! Alleluia!

**Alleluia! He is risen indeed!**

**Our Father ...**