

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Witnesses”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

Ascension of the Lord (Year C)

May 8, 2016

Acts 1:1-11

You have just heard from Luke’s two volume theological narrative of Jesus’ life and the beginning of the church. Though they are divided in our physical canon, the books of Luke and Acts were most likely written by one person. They are addressed to an individual, Theophilus, but as this name means “lover of God,” we could surmise that Luke’s intention was for these writings to be read and absorbed by a much wider audience.

At the end of Luke’s gospel, we find Jesus appearing to the disciples following his resurrection and saying, “Hey, you guys got anything to eat around here?” After dining on broiled fish, Jesus reads and interprets scripture to the disciples, whose minds are opened to understand and Jesus says to them, “You are witnesses to these things.”

And after a little walk with the disciples to Bethany, and a blessing, Jesus ascends into heaven. End of book one.

At the beginning of book two, the book of Acts, Luke returns to the ascension story and works it out a bit, giving a longer intro which includes the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That is all well and good, it seems, but the disciples want more. They have been waiting now for that holy figurative forty days after Easter, and they are ready to

see some action. They ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

They’ve waited long enough, right?

“Is this the time when you take over from the Romans and all will be well?”

“Is this the time when *you* become the *real* king and not just the promised king?”

“We’re all set, Lord. Go ahead. Do your thing.”

“Now is the time. This is the place. Do something, Jesus!”

When I was in middle and high school, I attended a Presbyterian wilderness camp every summer in the mountains of western North Carolina. One of my great joys every year was to go whitewater rafting. We rafted lots of rivers and trained counselors guided our rafts through the difficult and dangerous rapids. We often rafted the Nantahala, which is a fairly easy river to raft until you get to the very last rapid on the course, a Class III rapid called Nantahala Falls which included a required turn in the middle. Whenever we reached the slow waters just above this rapid, we would pull our rafts off to the side of the river, climb out of the boat and go check out the rapid from the land below. We watched other boats come down and studied the right way to approach the rapid and the wrong way. If the water pushed you in the wrong direction and the person steering at the back of the raft didn’t manage the push correctly, you could end up flipping the whole boat over and landing your crew in the swirling waters below, where men and women with ropes were stationed in preparation for necessary rescues. Or you could just end up hitting the rapid in such a way that one or two crew members ended up in the swirling waters below. Either scenario was *not* one our team desired, so we studied the rafts carefully as they navigated the big rapid successfully or unsuccessfully.

One year when I was sixteen, we were there again, right below Nantahala Falls, studying it as we prepared to finish our run down the icy mountain waters.

“See how he is leaning back and digging into his J-stroke?” our experienced counselor Russ asked. “That allows him to turn the boat in the best direction to enter the rapid.”

“See how the water is smooth in that one section at the top of the rapid? You want the nose of the boat to enter the rapid right there.”

“Ooooooo. See how that boat let the water push them into the wrong angle of entry? That’s why they flipped.”

Listening to Russ analyze these other boats made my stomach clench with anxiety. I feel the butterflies even now! The more we stood there, the more anxious I became. I couldn’t wait any longer. We just needed to get moving on this.

“Come on, Russ. Isn’t it time for you to do this thing?”

That was when Russ smiled his mischievous smile, came over to me and put his hand on the shoulders of my lifejacket. He leaned close to my ear and said, “Oh, but I’m not going to do it. You are.”

The disciples had been following Jesus for a long time now. They were ready for him to take charge, get busy, become the king and leader they had been anticipating him to be, especially now that he was on this side of the grave. They had studied enough. They were ready for some action!

“Come on, Jesus. Isn’t it time for you to do this thing?”

That’s when, I imagine, Jesus smiled his own mischievous smile, came over and put his arms around the closest disciples and said, “Not for you to know the times and periods for such things. Not for you to know. But . . .”

Whenever Jesus uses that little word, we should know to be prepared. “But. . .” he might have said with his hands on their shoulders (and didn’t they wish they were wearing lifejackets at the time), “but . . . no need to wait for me. The Holy Spirit

will give you power, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

“You will be my witnesses. . .

. . . to the world.”

And you have got to think that these disciples suddenly had butterflies in their stomachs that far out-fluttered the ones in my own on the banks of the Nantahala that day. At least Russ was in the boat with me as I guided it down the falls. The disciples had to stand there with their mouths open, having just been given the task of doing what Jesus had been doing, having just received the mantle of leadership from the ultimate leader, and watch him disappear into the air. The disciples had to stand there and watch as Jesus, their leader, their Lord, their Savior, their King, happily floated up into the sky, lifted up by some unseen force, until he was tucked into a cloud and carried away.

Can you imagine it? I can. The disciples staring into the sky thinking, “What, are you kidding me?” “Is this your idea of a joke?” “It’s not funny, Jesus.” “You can come back now.” “In fact, I’m just going to stare up at the clouds until you *do* come back. Because I’m not ready for this.”

And about that time, two angels—“men in white”—appeared to jerk the disciples back into reality:

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up at heaven? He’ll be back, yes, in the same way he left. But there is really no point in standing here waiting. You’ve got work to do. Remember what he said? You will be my witnesses.”

Have you ever wished that no one would be hungry?

Have you ever hoped that children would all have loving caregivers and role models in their lives?

Or that there would be no war or anger or violence in the world?

Have you ever wished that poverty could be eradicated?

Have you ever hoped that all people would be given equal rights and seen as they are seen in the eyes of God, no matter their race, creed, culture, gender, age or sexual orientation?

Have you ever wished that everyone knew of God's unconditional love and amazing grace?

“You will be my witnesses.”

Have you ever wished that someone would go onto the mission field, that someone would teach a class on forgiveness, that someone would lead an anti-poverty initiative, that someone would give foster care to those children whose parents can't care for them, that someone would teach classes for our children, that someone with the right gifts and talents and calling from God would do all the things that need to be done because they really do need to be done, we think, we are just not equipped or trained to do them.

Jesus said, “I will send the Holy Spirit to guide you. And you will be my witnesses.”

Have you ever been at work or at home or away from home when you encounter problem and you wish someone would come along and fix it, and then it hits you—no one is coming—no one else is going to fix it. If it is going to get done, you are going to have to do it yourself. So you stop waiting and staring at the problem and you get busy finding a solution. You get busy doing the work that needs to be done.

Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses.”

Annie Dillard believes we look around for the folks in our time who might be like the folks in the Bible, you know, the ones who do God's work. *We* can't be these

folks. We are too busy. We aren't trained. We don't have the skills. "So [Dillard writes] . . . Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? There is no one but us. There is no one to send . . . but only us. . . . there is no one but us. There never has been."

The disciples realized it fairly quickly. They realized that they were the ones who would begin the work of sharing the news of Jesus to the world. They were the witnesses. They were the ones.

An old African-American Spiritual sings, "My soul is a witness for the Lord." The song goes through its verses reminding the singers of the witnesses of the people of the Bible: Noah, Abraham and Sarah, David, Moses and Deborah and Miriam, Ezekiel and Daniel, Mary and Martha. At the end of these verses, the last verse asks, "Now who will be a witness for my Lord?"

All these others have been witnesses. Who will now be a witness? Who now will be the ones who will stand and testify to a love beyond comprehension, a peace that passes understanding, and a forgiveness that defies logic? Who now will testify to Jesus' message of radical inclusion and grace if we don't? Who now will live out Jesus' care for the poor, the weak, and the "least of these" if we don't?

The Right Reverend Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church, writes:

Jesus has his job and we who are his disciples and follow in his footsteps have ours. And ours is to witness—to witness and point to God's kingdom of love and justice and compassion. Witness to it, work for it, pray for it. Work and pray to end poverty. Work and pray to end hunger. Work and pray for a clean creation. Work and pray for an end to preventable diseases. Work and pray for gender equality. Work and pray for universal education for all God's children. Work and pray. Do the Gospel's work [he writes]. Put your hand to the gospel plow. WITNESS!¹

¹ The Right Reverend Bishop Michael Curry, "Can I Get a Witness? Faith and Global Hunger, Part 4," Day1, July 4, 2010, <http://day1.org/2038-can-i-get-a-witness-faith-global-hunger-part-4>

Friends, it is easy for us to stare up at the gorgeous wood beams of this sanctuary, or to gaze at the beautiful stained glass windows, or to go outside and stare into a deep blue sky and think, “Come on Jesus, isn’t it time to do this thing? There’s a lot of pain and hurt out there.” But then we feel the slight pressure on our shoulders, warm and encouraging, and hear the voice that says, “Oh, my friends, I’m right here with you through the power of the Holy Spirit. I have not left you. I have called and sent you. So go and be my witness to the world. You can do it. You all can do it together.”

Before he ascended, Jesus said to his disciples, “You will be my witnesses.”

Sounds clear enough to me. Let’s get to it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.