

A friend posted a meme the other day. At first I laughed out loud after having read it but then after sitting with it a few minutes, I quickly felt sadness in my heart. The meme? It read “Just going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car.” Sometimes on our journeys of faith, we may feel like wayfaring strangers. We may claim that we follow Jesus and yet we are often left feeling unsettled, confused or like outcasts. For the last few weeks we’ve been talking about what it looks like to be a disciple of the risen Christ. In other words, what is our mission now...our marching orders, if you will?! Today’s text is about Jesus’ ascension into heaven, which takes place 40 days after Easter. For Luke this is the last scene of Jesus with his disciples before his ascension. For those of you paying attention, it has yet to be 40 days after Easter Sunday; nonetheless, we’re looking at Jesus’s ascension **early** due to us studying the Book of Acts for the next several Sundays. The first opening verses of Acts summarize Luke’s Gospel, known as the first book because the same author, presumably Luke, is believed to have written both books. The Book of Acts, also called the Acts of the Apostles, is known as Luke’s second book. In Acts, the disciples are now referred to as apostles because they are sent out. Jesus’ ascension is the preamble to the apostles being sent. I like to think of the ascension as the kindling for the fire...the fire being the Holy Spirit. And Jesus has to leave for the Spirit to come as his Advocate. And we have been waiting on Christ’s return ever since the first Ascension Day. Here Jesus clearly gives the disciples and us our mission, along with a promise of God’s help through the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Luke’s understanding of God, “Jesus’ ascension hardly means that Jesus is absent from the church. As risen Lord, he provides the Spirit” (Gilberto Ruiz, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Therefore, there is “neither difference nor

competition between the work of Jesus and the activity of the Spirit” (Stephen Fowl, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). So before listening for God’s word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

I appreciate the disciples’ questions to Jesus and their last question to him before he ascends into heaven does not disappoint. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?” (v.6). This question is reasonable, given that he had been teaching them about God’s reign in the verses before our reading today. “As risen Lord, surely Jesus can fulfill the messianic expectation of restoring Israel to the political sovereignty it once held, can he not? Without denying a future restoration along these lines, Jesus tells them that they are not privy to God’s timetable. Instead, through the Holy Spirit they will soon receive power that transforms them from passive spectators to active witnesses to Jesus...on a global scale” (Ruiz). They just don’t get it...yet. Jesus does not directly answer their question but redirects them both rhetorically and literally as he is lifted into heaven” (Jeremy L. Williams, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

There are some things that we aren’t going to get- maybe not in this lifetime. For example, we aren’t told the timeline of when Jesus will return again. This is among the many mysteries of our faith, including the resurrection. But God knows, and God is sovereignly bringing all things to pass. Instead of answering WHEN the kingdom’s fullness will come to earth, Jesus tells them the WHAT they will participate in it and the HOW but the how is not as clear to them or us.

I wonder if the disciples took Jesus and his teachings for granted. When my grandmother was killed in a car crash, I wished that I could ask her for her

buttermilk cornbread recipe or how she grew such delicious tomatoes. I know that sounds trivial and yet, it's the little things when someone is no longer around that makes you appreciate and miss them even more. One moment the Risen Lord was there with them and then the next, he's gone. They've already lost him once, and he came back and now he's leaving them again?! It's like the disciples are so taken aback that Jesus is ascending into the clouds that they're in a daze. I mean- have you ever seen someone shoot up into the air and disappear into the clouds before? Though Jesus had been preparing them, something tells me that they weren't prepared. This is an in between moment- you know- what happens when you need to move, but you're stuck in the in between. "These transitional moments can be exciting and scary. They can also initiate new beginnings in the aftermath of trauma" (Ruiz). A friend of mine used to work at the Apple store in the Haywood mall. She tells the story of a woman who got stuck on one of the escalators there and immediately began shouting and called 911. She told them that she was stranded on the escalator at the Haywood Mall near the Apple Store. Laughing my friend said, "You wouldn't have believed it if you saw it yourself." You wonder if the 911 operator was thinking "C'mon, ma'am, is this a joke? Are you spoofing me?" The disciples heard this powerful yet confusing message from Jesus, and they're mesmerized- caught up in their disbelief and shock; they're in a snuck place much like this woman thought she was on the escalator in the mall. They were like deer in headlights. We, too, know that in-between or snuck place very well: times when we're stuck in grief, fear, shame, addiction, a health challenge or a certain belief. They are looking up wondering what just happened, what Jesus just said and what it all means. It doesn't make their situation any easier when the two men in white robes, these angels, ask them, "Men of Galilee,

why do you stand looking towards heaven?" Didn't they see what the disciples witnessed? The angels attempt to snap them out of their confusion as they stare up at the sky. It was more as if to say, "Hey Disciples, get moving! Jesus will one day return but for now you're his hands and his feet in this world!" Perhaps for the disciples it may have been more like, "Where's Jesus? We mean, where's the instruction manual or a map, angels? We don't know where to start! How do we proceed?" Jesus gives them their mission, the what, which is to be his witnesses in the world and the how, by the power of the Holy Spirit. But what does all that mean? Although the disciples, now called apostles, did not have authority, Jesus redirects them to realize that they would have power- power from the Holy Spirit. They will be empowered to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. Yes, God promises and sends the Spirit, which is a great reminder that we do not control when and how God's Spirit enters or interacts with others- regardless of geographic space, language, gender, nationality, etc.

The ends of the earth?! Do what? At that time, the places Jesus mentioned WERE the ends of the earth for the apostles. Think about it...most of the disciples had yet to travel very far from Jerusalem. I can hear them now, can't you?! "Doesn't Jesus know that Samaria is dangerous? I mean, come on, Jesus! You lost us at Judea." You see the fire has yet to take hold among them. You know it takes a while for a fire to get going. You have to start with kindling, some small pieces of wood or dryer lint, or newspaper, to get the fire going but once the fire gets going, it is powerful. Remember my analogy that fire is the Holy Spirit and the kindling is the ascension?! The ascension is a foreshadowing of Pentecost- the birth of the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. We already experienced

John's version of Pentecost two weeks ago. I've been preaching, but I haven't addressed what a witness is.

There are many ways to define being a witness. Actually, it can be quite an ambiguous word. For some it simply means "truth teller." While for others, they may think first of a court room/justice system scenario. While some think of witnessing as evangelism wherein they may define it as cramming religion down someone's throat. Witnessing doesn't necessarily mean finding out if someone is saved and then trying to get them saved. For such a message requires witnesses, not rulers. Personally I prefer to leave that job up to the work of the Holy Spirit. I know when I used to hear the word "witness" I would have negative associations with the word and say, "No way am I doing that, Jesus!" **But what if witnessing is simply forming relationships of love and grace?!** Faith is all that easy and all that hard. At times it can be especially a struggle to believe. And because it can be difficult...we need to be involved in a community of believers, such as the one gathered here. Community is how we gather the strength and the courage to witness in the world. Community is where we grow in our understanding of who God is in our lives. Community is how we discern what is real and what is fake...what is true and what is false. Community challenges us to look beyond ourselves and to witness to and serve others. As followers of Christ...we witness by the way we choose to live in community with one another. The choices we make in our daily living make a strong statement about whom we are choosing to follow. Where we spend our money, how we take care of the environment, where we buy our food and clothes, how we treat or speak of people, where we give our time, where and how we speak out against injustices, etc. is witnessing. A friend of mine when she was in her early 20s was really struggling with depression, and

she was also confused about faith and life, in general. She was visiting her aunt's house one weekend and there on the shelf she felt drawn to a particular book. She sat down to look through the book and before she knew it, she was weeping. There in that book was everything that she believed. She describes it like her feet had found the ground, and she could finally stand. What a witness! Another of my friend's shares a story of a time when she was around 16 years old, and she had lots of questions about faith. Her church refused to even receive her questions, let alone answer them. She had almost given up until she went and sat down at her grandmother, who was in her 80s at the time. She remembers her grandmother saying, "Patricia, I can't answer those questions. Those questions are too smart for me. All I can tell you is that I trust and follow Jesus Christ, and it has changed my life. What a witness! Another friend, who served as a chaplain with me in the hospital, loved to sing. She was infamous for entering a patient's room- never having met them before or read their chart- singing their favorite song, which brought tears to their eyes or a smile to their face. What a witness! I was in Africa fourteen years ago with a group of church folks on a mission experience to scout out places for and to educate others on wells. I was asked to preach and that was a whole other level experience with the Holy Spirit. After a day visiting in a village with no running water nor a water source nearby, we were loading into the van to travel back down a dirt road when one of traveling companions turned to me and said, "Jennifer, I never knew that Christianity could be so fun! Maybe I do have a place as a Christian?" What a witness! Who knew? God's Spirit knew. How or when has the Holy Spirit come upon you or others you know? When was there a "what a witness" moment for you?

Or maybe you feel as if you have lost sight of Jesus' mission? What are the barriers or things that stop you from doing Jesus' mission? What escalator are you stuck on? How can we get back on mission, individually and as a community of faith? Pray. Share how you've experienced Christ in your life. Show love and grace. Practice hospitality. Invite others to witness with you...just like we did this past week at the Nehemiah Action, as over 1600+ of us gathered together in Simpsonville to do justice and hold our elected officials accountable.

Tasha Cobbs Leonard sings a song called "Your Spirit." In it she sings, "Not by might; not by power; by your Spirit, God; send your Spirit, God. You are the fire; we are the temple; you are the voice; we are the song; you are our God; we are your people; you are the light; we stand in awe. You called us out- out of the darkness into your love; into your light; grace upon grace; beauty for ashes; you come to us; we come alive." These words remind me of Jesus' mission as well as another meme I saw this week. The meme? "Christianity isn't about reaching the sweet by and by somewhere in the sky. It's about creating a world where peace reigns, justice for the marginalized prevails, and compassion permeates all life" (Rev. Dr. Caleb J. Limes, Facebook). **Can I get a witness?** God is good...all the time! And all the time...God is good. Amen.