



# ACTS 1:1-11

## JESUS PLANTS HIS CHURCH

**May 7, 2023**  
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### **I. Introduction**

#### **Greeting & Welcome**

- Greet everyone... Introduce myself...“If I haven’t met you yet...”
- If you haven’t already, grab a bible and open up to the book of Acts, chapter 1.

#### **Introducing Acts**

If you’re new to our church one of the things we want you to know about us right away is that we love the Bible. This week someone asked me why we “chant” after we read the scripture for the message - we say “This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.” That might be something that’s outside your experience, but the reason we say that over and over every week is that we want that truth to wear a groove in the hearts of the people who gather as Union Church - that this book is breathed out by God, living and active, and useful for teaching us and rebuking us, and training us in righteousness. In the account of the creation of the world the bible says that God spoke and by the power of his word things were created where before there was nothing. And in the same way as we seek to grow as people... as our little church plant seeks to be built up into maturity, what we are really after is for God to build something where there was nothing! And that happens in us when God speaks. So we love the bible, we situate ourselves under the bible’s authority, we take comfort in the gospel promise of the bible, we want to be creatures of the Word of God.

And so on Sundays that means that when we gather together, we open up The Book and move through passages of scripture, often we’re moving through whole books of the bible. And that’s what we’re starting today. From now through August we’re going to be in the book of Acts together. By the end of the summer, Lord willing, we will have walked through the first eleven chapters of the Book of Acts.

Since Easter we’ve been asking, *What does it mean for us to live in light of the resurrection of Jesus?* And as we step into the book of Acts we are going to have that question answered as the resurrection of Jesus Christ leads to the birth of Jesus’ Church.

Have any of you ever taken a close look at your family history? If you’ve ever looked into the mirror and thought, *Why are you the way that you are?* odds are that a significant piece of the answer to that question is that you’ve been shaped by your family of origin. Like, whether I know it or not I am who I am because two generations ago George Ezikian fought with the French Resistance in World War II, then immigrated to the United States, married Louise, had three kids, and worked for Ford Motor Company for many decades. Now, I’m not thinking about that history when I wake up every day, but

even though that story is removed from my present reality it shapes what I am like, right? If you've ever heard a successful entrepreneur talk about a successful company they've built you've probably heard the company's origin story - how they started selling their product in their garage, and nearly went bottom up three times, and there were ups and downs, but now the company is grown... Leaders tell the company's origin story because the story of their beginning profoundly influences what they are like now.

Well the book of Acts is like both a family history and an institutional origin story. It's an account of the planting of the early church. It's like a family history because the early church that we read about in the book of Acts has continued and by the miraculous kindness of God Union Church (and any other Christian Church) can trace its family tree back to these roots. For Christians the people written about in the book of Acts are *our* brothers and sisters in Christ. Acts is like an origin story because we are being given a window into the founder and the mission that began it all and has shaped God's people since the very beginning. And because we are a part of the church (Big "C") that Jesus' planted, the church's history and mission is important because where we come from shapes us. How we began should profoundly influence what we are like now.

So today we're at the beginning in Acts 1, looking at the first eleven verses. And as we unpack this passage the main thing I want us to see is that Jesus plants his church by choosing a people who give witness to the gospel, rely on the Holy Spirit, and hope in His return.

So let's look at the book together.

## II. Background On Acts

The very first verse of Acts gives us a chance to establish the background of this book. In verse one it says, "<sup>1</sup> In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach," which tells us first of all that the book of Acts is actually a sequel to another book - the Gospel of Luke. A man named Luke is the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Luke was a follower of Jesus. The Apostle Paul mentions Luke in three of his New Testament letters, so we know he was a companion of Paul. In Colossians Paul calls Luke, "the beloved physician" (4:14) so we can call him Dr. Luke. And Dr. Luke has addressed both his Gospel account and the Book of Acts to a particular person: someone named Theophilus. (*Now you could name your baby Jack or Robert... but you also could name him Theophilus. Think about that!*) We don't know much about Theophilus, but most NT scholars believe that he was a real person - probably a believer, probably a wealthy person or public official because Luke gives him the title "most excellent" in his gospel. Theophilus may even be Luke's patron who provided money for Luke to research and complete his work. In the Gospel of Luke, Luke writes, "<sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,<sup>4</sup> that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:3). So Luke's project is to compile for Theophilus (and for everyone who reads his writings) a history of the life of Christ and the birth and expansion of the church. But he's not just writing a dry blow by blow account. Luke is curating a specialized history that's designed to teach his readers the truth about God and orient them toward the mission that Jesus gives his church.

These first eleven verses in Acts set the trajectory of the rest of the book by retelling some of the final events of Jesus' earthly ministry and presenting them as the foundation for the story of the early church. And through these foundational events Jesus sets apart a group of people and gives them a mission, promises them power to accomplish the mission, all the while setting their hope on his return.

### III. We Witness to the Gospel

So I want to first consider the mission Jesus gives his disciples and to do that I'm just going to walk through the passage verse by verse and make some comments as we go.

<sup>1</sup> In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, <sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

So let's think of verse 1 & 2 as an introductory summary sentence. Verse 2 might be a little hard to understand when you look at it on its own - *What does it mean when it says "after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles"?* - but Luke is just telling Theophilus, "in my first book I covered Jesus' ministry up to the point of his ascension to heaven, which happened after he gave final instructions to his apostles." He's going to tell us what those final instructions looked like in the next few verses. But I want to pull out one observation: Luke says in verse 2 that Jesus gave commands to the apostles "whom he had chosen." Now often when the NT speaks of God choosing people it's talking about God choosing for salvation. But here the emphasis isn't on salvation - we're going to see this is a group of people Jesus has chosen to set apart for a mission. They've been chosen for a task.

If you belong to Jesus, you've been hand picked and chosen for a task as well.

So then, picking back up in verse 3, Luke starts to paint a picture of what it looked like for Jesus to give commands to the apostles whom he'd chosen.

<sup>3</sup> He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

So after three years of apprenticeship under Jesus these guys need 40 more days of Jesus-seminary. And we don't know exactly what Jesus taught them, but Luke is telling us that it's all about the kingdom of God. There might be some overlap here with what Luke wrote at the end of his gospel account in Luke 24 where it says, "...These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, <sup>47</sup> and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'" So 40 days of bible study and teaching with the Risen Jesus.

<sup>4</sup> And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

(We'll talk more about their waiting for the Spirit here in a minute. And the book of Acts is going to give us plenty of opportunities to talk about God the Spirit, so buckle up for a fun summer.)

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority."

Now my first instinct here is to think, there go the thick-skulled disciples again. They're so eager for the kingdom, so eager to throw off Roman oppression that they're not getting it again! And that's kind of been their track-record in the gospels, so that could be true. But think about what they've been learning about with Jesus for forty days: verse three says Jesus has been speaking with them about the kingdom of God. Jesus had opened their mind to understand the scriptures and he's been teaching them about everything in the OT that was fulfilled in him. Maybe Jesus brought them to a passage like this one from Ezekial 36:

<sup>24</sup> "For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. ... <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws... <sup>33b</sup> On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. ...<sup>36</sup> Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the LORD have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.'

This is one of many OT passages about the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel. And Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of these promises. It's entirely possible that these disciples have spent 40 days with Jesus having their eyes opened to how Jesus is the "yes" to all God's promises, so then they ask "Lord, are you going to do that restoration now?" And Jesus' answer is not a rebuke. He doesn't criticize their eagerness for restoration, he instead redirects their eagerness from the *timing* of the restoration to the *mission* of it.

You see the restoration of God's Kingdom is about to happen. There is about to a great in-gathering from the nations, the Spirit is going to be poured out, God's people will be established, the ruins that were destroyed will be rebuilt and in the book of Acts we're going to see that all that kingdom work commences with the birth of the church and continues into today, but the disciple's assumption is that it's all going to be fully realized immediately and Jesus' correction is to say, the timing is not for you to know, but you will receive power... and you will be my witnesses. That's what Acts 1:8 says: <sup>8</sup> But 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."

You will be engaged in this great work as I gather my people out of the nations, from all countries of the world, you will proclaim my name when my Spirit is poured out in you... you will be a part of the restoring work that I am doing and you will testify to the ends of the earth that the LORD has done it.

That is the mission the Lord has given the people that he has set apart.

### **That Mission is Our Mission**

Now that was a lot of working through the text to get to the mission that Jesus gave his apostles. But what I want us to see in the unfolding of that text is that Christ has done the same kind of setting apart in us today, so that the mission he gives his disciples then is our mission today.

If you're a follower of Jesus, just consider for a moment your spiritual heritage. Jesus gave this job to the apostles 2,000 years ago: to testify about the king who has been raised from the dead, who cleanses us from sin, and who will restore all things. And he charged them to be witnesses to the gospel at home in their city, in their region, and to the whole world. And you are here today SAVED from the wrath of God, with a hope and a future because you have believed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the reason you are saved is because God worked through those first witnesses to bring the gospel to Judea, and then Samaria, and then Rome, and new generations of disciples embraced their identity as witnesses of the gospel and took the gospel to Spain, and Africa, and India, and Europe, and still more generations of disciples obeyed the call of Christ to be his witnesses and the gospel crossed oceans and... eventually through the merciful providence of God working through his

obedient people over geography and across centuries, the gospel reached you! You have life in the Kingdom of God because of the witness of generations upon generations of disciples who read this command of Christ as a command to them. And they gave up their time, their comforts, their status, their security, and even their lives so that the reality of the Risen Christ might be testified to to the ends of the earth.

And here in Livingston County in 2023 Jesus says to Union Church - you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth! The call to testify to the gospel of Jesus is for you as much as it was for the apostles in Acts 1, friends.

Can you clear away the debris of the distractions of your life to appreciate the weight of your calling as a follower of Jesus?

Can you rise above the objections raised by your fears about breaking the cultural taboos enough to see the urgency of the mission you have been given?

Can you break free from the tyranny of your immediate needs and desires to see the freedom and glory in proclaiming an eternal message of salvation?

At Union Church we summarize our vision with two words: mobilized disciples. In our region of 190,000 people at least 60% of them have not believed the gospel. Which means that 60% of the people you see as you go about your life need to hear the gospel and be saved from the eternal destruction that their sin has purchased for them. They need to be mobilized from death to life. And the other 40% are (maybe) Christians... and that is majorly stretching it. (There are so many who take the label Christian, but don't know Christ.) But generously speaking that means the other 40% of people you interact with need to be mobilized from stagnant, apathetic, spectator Christianity into the identity that believers have been given as witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When we talk about living as witnesses it's easy to start asking questions about "how." Strategies for living missionally. But today I'm just trying to war against the lie that some Christians have embraced with the pattern of their lives that says witnessing to the gospel is a non-essential, peripheral element in the life of a believer. This passage won't let us think that. As we continue to work through Acts I hope to deal with some of the how to's of sharing the gospel, but right now I just want you to see that the calling is unavoidable in the life of a disciple of Christ.

Now, hear me, I know that can be anxiety inducing. And I know we can feel so weak in this area. I know we fail. And the good news for us who are fearful, and weak, and who fail as witnesses of Christ, is that Jesus has given us a means to battle against those things as we live as his witnesses. He's equipped his church with a power to depend on and a future to hope in.

#### **IV. Power to Depend On: We Rely on the Holy Spirit**

I said we'd come back to verses 4 & 5. Jesus gives his chosen witnesses a mission to the ends of the earth, but before they go he orders them to wait. "he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." And then in verse 8, even as he marks them as his witnesses, Jesus assures them by saying, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses."

Thank goodness the Lord has not left us alone to do this work! He's promised us his Spirit. He commanded the disciples to wait for the Spirit, but for us today we don't need to wait. The Spirit has been poured out! We need to depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses.

And do you see - fearful, weak, failing witness - do you see in verse 8 the relationship between the Holy Spirit and our witness? There is no hedging in Jesus' words. There's no "maybe." He says, "You WILL be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." And how can he say that? Because the God the Holy Spirit wants the ends of the earth to know Christ! And the God the Spirit has the power to make it happen! The Holy Spirit is God and God accomplishes that which he sets out to do! And if you are a Christian, you have been given the power of the Holy Spirit to witness the gospel to your friends, family, your neighborhood, and the nations.

- Example of my failure: meeting neighbor, failing to give witness to the truth of the gospel
  - This does not mean I don't have the power of the Spirit. My journey of sanctification is not yet complete. But the good news is that I do have the Spirit and that work will be completed by the Spirit.

God has given us his Holy Spirit to...

- **To teach us as Christ taught the apostles**
  - **John 14:26** <sup>26</sup> But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."
  - **John 16: 13-14** <sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you."
  - Luke 24:4
- **To Give Us Words to Testify**
  - **Luke 12:11-12** <sup>11</sup> And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, <sup>12</sup> for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."
- To take the Gospel to the world...
  - **John 16:8** <sup>8</sup> And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment..."

We have been called as witnesses of Jesus Christ, we have been empowered by the Holy Spirit for the work. And we have a hope to set our eyes on.

Jesus plants his church by choosing a people who witness to the gospel, rely on the Holy Spirit, and hope in His return.

#### **IV. We Are Not Idle AND We Are Hopeful**

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, <sup>11</sup> 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 into heaven."

Jesus is gone physically, but by his Spirit he is with us. (And that's better. Jesus told his disciples in John 16:7 that it was to their advantage that he go away because the presence of the Holy Spirit is to our advantage.)

Jesus is gone physically, but by his Spirit he is with us. And in Jesus' absence the angels say, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?" In other words, why are you standing idle? You have an identity and a mission and it is not to stand around and idly watch for his return.

But as you go about the work of witnessing the gospel of Jesus Christ, you do have this great hope. Not that the world is going to burn, but we'll all escape to heaven someday. No. That the Kingdom of God will be fully and finally restored on earth when Christ comes again to make all things new.

We live in the already not yet. The kingdom has come, and by God's grace we work in the coming of the kingdom as Christ's witnesses, and glory to God the kingdom will one day come fully. Let that be our hope and security as we do the work of witnessing while we wait for his return.