



April 12, 2015  
Pastor Mark Toone  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *90 Day Challenge II: The Acts of the Holy Spirit* Acts 1:1-13

Welcome to Easter Plus One! Last Sunday we welcomed nearly 3000 people to celebrate the most important moment in human history, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many of those folks we won't see again until Christmas. But you know what happens to some visitors every Easter: They come back! They realize, "I want to hear more about the God who brings dead things back to life! I want a second chance!" So here you are. Welcome! And to make you feel really welcome, I'd like for every visitor here to come up right now and sing a solo for us.

Nah... we aren't going to do that. But if the idea of singing in front of crowds is terrifying, I've got a video for you to watch. We have a team of five Chapel Hill folks who spent last week at Portland State University as part of an outreach to the students there. The theme was "Fearless." One of the events they sponsored was a karaoke night. If you want to see "fearless," take a look and see if you recognize the lead singer! [Show video]

Of course, if you believe that God raised Jesus death to life, then why wouldn't you be fearless, right? I mean just look at the disciples after Jesus appeared to them alive, having walked out of that tomb. Well, let's do that. In John 20:19, we read about a meeting that took place on Easter Sunday night. "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews..." Wait. This is after the resurrection... after Mary saw Jesus, after Peter and John ran to the empty tomb. But they are still terrified?

Not exactly fearless... How about Matthew's account? Well, in the very paragraph of his gospel, here is what we read: "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." Wait. They are looking at him! How can they doubt that? These are the guys who are going into the world to make disciples? Wow!

Ok, how about Mark? How does he portray the disciples, post-resurrection? Well, the women leave the tomb "trembling and bewildered," and at first said "nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." And when they do tell the disciples, here is what we read: "When they heard that Jesus was alive and that Mary had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either."

And finally, Luke tells us that when Jesus appeared, "They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost..." When Jesus showed them his hands and feet, "...they still did not believe it..."

And these are Jesus' hand-picked disciples! These are the guys he is counting on to go into the world with his message? Doesn't sound very promising, does it? A room full of terrified, unbelieving men... not exactly fearless.

And yet, thirty years later the gospel of Jesus had spread over most of the Roman Empire and beyond. Members of Caesar's household had come to Christ! And within 40 years, all but one of the disciples had been martyred for their faith. Peter, Andrew and Simon the Zealot were crucified; James was beheaded. "Doubting" Thomas was stabbed and burned alive; Philip was impaled by iron hooks and hung upside down to die. Matthew was pinned to the ground with spears and beheaded; Bartholomew was flayed to death with a whip. James was thrown down from the Temple, and the other Judas was beaten to death with sticks!

So here's my question for you this morning: How is it that eleven men described as "frightened, terrified, bewildered, startled, unbelieving" even after they had seen the risen Christ... how is it they found the courage to die for Jesus in some of the most horrific ways possible? What in the world happened?

Well, that's why Dr. Luke wrote a second book. We know he wrote a gospel, but did you know he wrote part two? We call it the Book of Acts. Luke was a physician. He was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul and an historian. Luke wrote the only history book in the New Testament. And in the first few verses of that book, we discover the secret that transformed cowardly men-in-hiding into martyrs whose courageous testimony changed the world. I want to tell you the first part of Luke's story, and you listen for the secret "power" ingredient, okay?

<sup>1</sup>In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup>until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

<sup>4</sup>On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup>For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." <sup>6</sup>So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup>He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

<sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

<sup>9</sup>After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. <sup>10</sup>They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup>"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

<sup>12</sup>Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. <sup>13</sup>When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. <sup>14</sup>They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

We don't know who Theophilus was. In Greek it means "God-lover". Many suspect it was a pseudonym for a high-ranking official who was secretly interested in Jesus. Luke dedicated his gospel to Theophilus, the story of all that Jesus "began to do and teach." Now, in part II, he tells how the work of Jesus continued after he left this earth. I asked you to listen for the secret ingredient that transformed cowardly men into courageous witnesses. What is that ingredient?

Yes, the Holy Spirit! Three times in these opening verses Luke mentions the Holy Spirit. In fact, out of 28 chapters, 18 of them explicitly mention the Holy Spirit. But even when the Spirit isn't mentioned by name, He is the star of the show. This book came to be known as *The Acts of the Apostles*. But many have argued that it ought to be titled, *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*, because it was men and women empowered by the Holy Spirit whom God used to bring the gospel of Jesus to a very antagonistic world.

I wonder; is our world today any less antagonistic? Open Doors, a group that advocates for persecuted Christians, reports that in 2013 there were 2,123 confirmed killings of Christians because of their faith. This was double the previous year! Other estimates range even higher: from 7,000 to as many as 100,000 killed. It is more dangerous to be a Christian today than it was in the time of Nero.

Even in our own country, we are increasingly under attack by cultural bullies. Two Christian high school girls in Fargo wanted to start a pro-life club in their high schools but were denied because the club would be "too controversial." This month, the Supreme Court will hear arguments on the definition of marriage in which those who hold a biblical view of marriage will be described as opposing gay marriage on the grounds of hatred. The respected Christian campus ministry, Intervarsity, has been *derecognized* by California State Universities. What was their offense? They

insist that their student leaders be *Christians*, and that is *discriminatory*. Even in the United States, it is becoming riskier and costlier to be a true disciple of Jesus.

We have spent this year talking about what it means to be a disciple-maker. Many have found this stimulating. Others have not been so affirming. One blue card said, "You are talking too much about discipleship." I guarantee that will be the response of some of your friends if you actually choose to obey the Great Commission instead of just memorizing it. If you seek to make disciples, it may set you at odds with family and friends. It is risky... perhaps intimidating. Just like it was for the disciples at the end of the gospels.

But here's the good news: you have something the disciples did not have at the end of the gospels. Or should I say, you have *someone* the disciples did not have and could not have as long as Jesus was with them. That's what he meant in John 16 when he said, "I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away." In other words, Jesus said, "You'll be better off without me". How could that possibly be the case? How could it possibly be true that they would be better off without Jesus than with him? What was he talking about? The Holy Spirit... the Spirit of Jesus!

While Jesus was on earth, he was trapped in a human body. In human form, he walked with people, slept and lived and ate and laughed and labored. It was his human form that suffered and died on the cross. Oh, he did some amazing things in that body like walk on water, perform miracles and rise from the dead. Still the very nature of the incarnation was that it *trapped* God the Son in a human form. He was limited which meant that if Jesus was here he could not be there. And if one disciple of Jesus was here and another disciple of Jesus was there, then Jesus could be with only one or the other... or maybe, not either of them because he was somewhere else.

This worked fine when the disciples were with Jesus. But in his Great Commission, Jesus ordered them to go into all the world. We heard that repeated in today: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Every disciple who was martyred died in a different place in the world. Now Jesus promised, "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." That could not be possible if Jesus was still on earth in human form.

But there was a plan. Jesus would return to heaven and then would send his Holy Spirit—the Spirit who could be everywhere at the same time, the Spirit who was not only with the disciples but living inside every disciple. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "You are better off without me. Because after I have sent my Holy Spirit, I will be with every one of you, all the time, everywhere, forever!"

It's not like the idea of the Holy Spirit was a new innovation. Do you know the first time He is mentioned? Genesis 1:2: "The Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep!" We find the Holy Spirit throughout the Old Testament, as a matter of fact.

But what was different is this: in Old Testament times, the Holy Spirit would come and then the Holy Spirit would leave. The Holy Spirit would come; the Holy Spirit would leave. He was on earth with God's people for a time, and then He would withdraw. So you were never sure when or if the Holy Spirit would make an appearance.

Ahhhh, but the prophets foretold a time that would be different when God would send his Spirit upon his people, and He would never leave again. Joel speaking for God said this: "Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.... and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!"

Well, that time had come. God was ready to send the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus—upon his people. And He would never leave them again.

That is the story of Acts. It is the record of the Holy Spirit who comes as promised, fortifies fearful disciples, and turns them loose to change their world. And here's the most exciting news of all: Acts is also a description of what the Holy Spirit wants to do through every one of us! When we received Jesus as the Lord of our life—when we asked Him into our hearts—what did we think happened? A little man came to live in a little room inside us?

No; we invited the eternal, all-powerful, always-present Holy Spirit of Jesus to take up residence in our life. The Holy Spirit is a *who* not a *what*—he is the personal, relational expression of God who lives inside of every believer. When our sins are washed away, Holy Spirit does that. When we are adopted as God's children, Holy Spirit does that. When we are given gifts for ministry, Holy Spirit gives those gifts. If we only knew the power that lives inside of us we would be emboldened to do everything Jesus commands us to do.

For the last 90 days, we journeyed through the gospels learning about Jesus. How many of you participated in that challenge? Do you think you know more about Jesus now than you did three months ago? Well, for the next 90 days, we are going to learn more about the most mysterious member of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit. And as a help, we have prepared another journal for you.

This challenge will be different. In the last one, you were asked to read one chapter a day. That was a lot of reading, but it was a great overview. With Acts, we are going deeper. We will spend one week per chapter, which means you'll have a chance to really become familiar with that passage. We will read the same chapter every day for five days. And we suggest that you practice different disciplines each day in order to receive what the Spirit wants to do in you. In fact, the days are divided by the letters S-P-I-R-I-T! Each letter represents a practice for that day: Study, Parallel, Invite, Ruminare, Initiate and Talk.

On Monday, we will Study the passage. On Tuesday, we will read a Parallel passage from the gospels. Everything we find in Acts, we discover that Jesus taught us in the gospels. On Tuesday, you will go back and remind yourself of that teaching and see how it is fulfilled in Acts. On Wednesday, we will Invite the Spirit to speak to us through the text. We will pray part of the text and then spend five minutes just listening to what the Holy Spirit wants to teach us. On Thursday, we will Ruminare. We will memorize a key verse and learn to reflect upon it throughout the day. On Friday, we will Initiate. We will take what we sense the Holy Spirit is telling us to do and do it! And finally, we will Talk. Share with someone, sometime during the week, what the Holy Spirit is teaching you. S-P-I-R-I-T.

Every Monday I will post a blog on our website that offers insights into that week's chapter. Especially if you are new to Bible study, you will find this very helpful in launching your week of study. This week only, we will send a daily email to encourage you in these new disciplines. And finally, I would encourage you to get an accountability partner; it will help you stay faithful to the Challenge.

If you take this study as seriously as you did the first 90 Day Challenge, you will be introduced to many core spiritual disciplines: reading, memorizing, praying, reflecting upon and acting in obedience to God's Word. I hope you will give all of them a try. But obviously, you are free to start wherever you feel comfortable and, hopefully, to move on from there. But once again, we will focus as an entire church body on one passage of scripture and then return on Sunday to hear a sermon based on that passage.

You know, the funniest part of today's reading was when the disciples were standing there, staring into the sky as Jesus was taken up. Remember the angels who spoke to them? "What are you doing staring into the sky?" In other words, "Get to work!" There is a sense in which Christians today just gawk at Jesus. We've spent 90 days learning what it means to follow him and make disciples. That's enough looking; it's time to get to work. And the exciting news of Acts is this: the Holy Spirit has already come upon you and given you the power to be his witnesses...in Gig Harbor, Pierce County, Washington state and even to the ends of the earth. So stop gawking! Let's get to work!