

May 17th, 2026

Acts 1:6-14 “Bearing Witness”

I know it may seem strange that we’re working our way backwards through the Book of Acts but trust me. Next week when we celebrate Pentecost in the Park it will make sense why we started here this week. This is Luke’s version of “The Great Commission.” Matthew’s version is more well-known. I’ve got it memorized in the King James Version of course:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

That was Matthew 28:18-20. Mission statements have been built on this passage. Songs have been written about it. Luke’s version is similar. The circumstances are the same. Jesus has died and risen. They’ve been waiting for the big finale to his ministry, and here it is. They’re ready for the victory lap. Rome still rules. Israel is still oppressed. This must be it. The dramatic victory is almost here. This is the finish line. They were asking, “Lord, is it time?” “Are we there yet?” Is this the moment when everything changes? When we finally get to see Jesus fix the world?

This is a deeply human question isn’t it? We still ask it. “Is this the election that fixes everything?” “Is this the movement?” “Is this the cure?” “Is this the breakthrough we’ve been waiting for?” “Is this the moment when God steps in and makes everything right?” The disciples are looking for Jesus to bring the kingdom *for* them. That’s when the surprise comes. After all this buildup and excitement, Jesus says, “You’re asking the wrong questions!” See, the question isn’t “*When* will God act,” it’s “*How* will God act?” And how God acts is through Spirit-

filled people. The reign of God isn't barging in through spectacle, it arrives through witness.

Here's something I've noticed over the course of my life and throughout my study of history. We have a tough time defining what power is. Generation X is not ashamed to admit that some of our core values come from Star Trek and reading comic books. And those of us who are Spider-man fans know that "with great power comes great responsibility." Sure, we know this at a surface level, but when the stakes are high, we have a hard time understanding the practical application. We think power is all about domination. We think it's about control. We think of power in terms of military victories where you strike fast and show no mercy – I think the term was "shock and awe" during the second Gulf war. That's the way Empire defines power.

In verse 8 of our passage today, Jesus says, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes." As you can imagine, this is a different kind of power. The Holy Spirit gives power to tell the truth. To heal and reconcile. To love boldly and keep hope alive. It gives us power to embody the story of Jesus. Jesus says that upon receiving power from the Holy Spirit, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth." Okay, what does that mean? I remember when I visited Black Disciple churches in Southside Virginia, the preacher would emphasize a point he made in a sermon by saying, "Can I get a witness?" to which the congregation would say, "Amen!" or "Testify!" But what kind of a witness is Jesus talking about here?

A witness is someone who sees something and tells the truth about what they saw. Witnesses testify in court. You need a witness to get married in California and most other states. You can hire a notary to be a witness when you sign a legal document that has to be sent somewhere. A witness is one who says, "I was there and saw it happen." So what did the disciples witness during their time with Jesus? They saw Jesus heal the blind, the lame, the sick, and the afflicted. They saw storms calmed, outcasts welcomed, and the hungry fed. They saw forgiveness offered,

fear transformed, and resurrection breaking the chains of death. And here in Jerusalem where Jesus told his disciples to meet him after his resurrection, he told them to tell others what they saw. What they bore witness to.

We are the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Our founders didn't come up with this name because it sounds cool (although it kind of does.) Our founders wanted to make it clear that we are not just people who sit in our pews and receive religious goods and services each week. Like the disciples, we exist to bear witness in what we do. The church does not exist to preserve doctrines and institutions. The church exists to carry on the ministry that Jesus started. We exist to bear witness.

You might be thinking, "Okay, but I've never seen Jesus. Kids may think I'm old enough to have seen Jesus, but I haven't." That's true. We have not walked the roads in Galilee. We have not touched Jesus' hands. We have not sat on a hillside where he fed 5,000 men and their families with five loaves of bread and two fishes. But that doesn't mean we haven't seen him. Here's where we do see Christ though –

We see Christ in acts of compassion. In forgiveness. In courage. In community. In people loving each other when the world says not to. In hope overcoming despair. In mercy interrupting cruelty. When dignity is restored to someone who the world has discarded. In all these things, we are bearing witness to Christ. So what do we do with this?

Uh-oh. Sounds like Pastor Jesse is gearing up to talk about the "E" word. The "E" word? Yes. "Evangelism." Now there's a loaded word. Sometimes we think of evangelists as professionals. Many folks in the room today might remember Billy Graham, one of the most famous evangelists of the 20th century. Thousands of people would pack stadiums to see Billy Graham preach in person. Does anyone remember the days when tv stations would actually broadcast Billy Graham crusades live on network television? This guy was a master at communication. Hundreds of people who came to faith would walk

forward at these rallies during the invitation. And can anyone remember the song they would walk forward to? “Just As I Am!”

So when we hear “evangelism” or “evangelist” we think, “Nope! Not me! I don’t know enough, I’m not persuasive enough, and I don’t have the right words!” But think about this -- witnesses aren’t experts. They just tell the truth about what they’ve seen. I’ve seen hope. I’ve experienced forgiveness. This church or this community has carried me through some tough times. I thought I was alone, but I discovered I wasn’t. God met me in my grief and accepted me, “just as I am!”

So let’s get back to the disciples original question – “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Is this when you rush in and return God’s reign on earth in the blink of an eye? Is this where the “shock and awe” campaign begins? But notice what happens here. Jesus entrusted the work of establishing God’s reign to ordinary people empowered by the Holy Spirit. And somehow, through generations of imperfect witnesses, the story is still being told.

The world still needs witnesses. We need people who can say, “I have experienced grace. I’ve seen healing. I’ve seen love overcome fear. I’ve seen Christ alive in this world.” The risen Christ continues building God’s kingdom through ordinary people who bear witness to what they have seen. And because we’ve seen it, we must share it.

So here’s what I want you to take with you this week:

You do not have to be famous, perfect, or professionally religious to bear witness to Jesus Christ. You simply have to tell the truth about where you have seen grace.

Maybe you’ve seen it in kindness.

Maybe in forgiveness.

Maybe in the people who carried you when life fell apart.

Maybe in a moment when hope showed up unexpectedly.

The world does not just need arguments about God. The world needs witnesses. People who can say, “I have seen love stronger than fear.”

And if you've seen that, then you already have a witness to share.