

You Shall Be My Witnesses
Acts 1:1-14
Mark 6:7-13

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Acts 1:1-14

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This’, he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’

So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Mark 6:7-13

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, ‘Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.’ So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

When our story opens, Jesus’ followers are under an indefinite stay-at-home order. Jesus orders them not to leave Jerusalem, until the promise of the Father has been fulfilled. He doesn’t tell them when that will be.

In addition, the Temple authorities and the Roman authorities have just executed Jesus as a rebel. They may not be working very hard right now to find all of his followers, but they might change their minds if they knew that they were getting together. So, gathering all together is dangerous.

Jesus' disciples ask him if this is the time when he will restore the kingdom to Israel. Somebody is still thinking in terms of earthly kingdoms and power. Jesus tells them something that must have been very difficult for them to hear.

“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”

We don't get to know in advance when the Second Coming will be, when Christ shall come with shout of acclamation,¹ and every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.² We know it's going to happen, but we don't know when. And we have to deal with the world until then.

Right now, we don't know yet when it will be safe and wise for all of us to meet together in the sanctuary. But that time will come. And we have to deal with the world until then.

There is a concept in business management called the Stockdale Paradox. It's named after Admiral James Stockdale, who was a prisoner of war in Vietnam for eight years. The concept is that, in difficult times, you have to balance faith in the eventual outcome with a realistic understanding of what's going on right now. Admiral Stockdale told stories of the prisoners who insisted that they would all be home by Christmas. Those prisoners had more and more trouble as Christmas came and went. Some even died, essentially of despair. But, because

¹ Stuart K Hine, *O Lord My God (How Great Thou Art)* (1953), *Glory to God Hymnal* #625.

² Romans 14:11.

Admiral Stockdale's faith that he would eventually go home was not tied to a specific date, he survived and was even able to support others.³

Jesus' original followers experienced the Stockdale Paradox. They started out expecting Jesus' Second Coming any day now. Then they were expecting it any year now, and certainly before the end of their natural lifetimes.

That was two thousand years ago. You may have noticed that the Second Coming hasn't happened yet. I'm sure that, for many of the early Christians, it was a crushing blow when they realized that they would not see the Second Coming from the mortal world. That means that Christians have been living with the Stockdale Paradox, some of us dealing with it better than others, for two thousand years.

Jesus' first followers experience a kind of limbo similar to what we're experiencing. It's helpful to know that. What's even more helpful is knowing what they do about it.

We'll be talking for the next few weeks about all that the first Christians do in the wake of Jesus' Ascension. We'll be walking through the Book of Acts the same way that we walked through Mark's Gospel this Spring. They eventually spread the Gospel all around the world and found the Church as we know it.

But, the first thing they do, while they are under the stay at home order, is they study the Scriptures, and they pray. They teach others about Jesus Christ, first by example, and then by telling the stories. They never lose faith that Jesus died for our sins, that He was raised from the dead, and that He will return.

They serve as Jesus' witnesses in the world.

³ This concept is explained in more detail in Jim Collin's classic business book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't* (2001), pp. 83-87.

Witnesses in a court case tell their story. They tell people what they have seen and experienced, so that they can understand. Jesus' first followers tell other people what they have seen and experienced, and it is extraordinary.

We, too, are witnesses. Every day, every time we interact with another human being, we testify about how we understand God and the world. We do that by what we say, and what we do. We do that louder by how we say it, and how we do it.

Are we kind, and loving? If so, we testify about a God who loves us, and who loves them.

Are we patient? If so, we testify that we are confident in God's work in the world, so we can afford to be patient.

I pray that all of us will take extra care, and extra time if we need to, to be kind, and loving, and patient as we deal with other people this week, and every week. Because that way our lives will testify to the God whom we know, who loves us enough to save us from our own sins.

In Christ's name,

Amen