

*Words and Deeds: The Acts of the Apostles*

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*Acts 1:1-12*

Our final Scripture reading today is from Acts 1:1-12. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy and trustworthy Word. “In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 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. 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. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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.” After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “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.” Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city.”

What happens after Snow White marries Prince Charming? “They lived happily ever after.” But what does happily ever after look like? We want to know what happens next. Whether it's the Marvel Superheroes or Miss Marple or Anne of Green Gables, whether books or movies, we don't want stories to end. Some series continue long after the main plot is resolved.

Believers in the early church wanted to know as much as they could about Jesus. The first three gospels have many stories in common, but each one has unique parts of Jesus' life they share with us alone. John, who likely wrote his gospel last, includes specific events in Jesus' life from the perspective of His one of His dearest friends, and much of it you can only find there. Why is it so different? Maybe because people couldn't get enough...and after a few decades to think about his friendship with Jesus, John wanted to give a greater picture of who Jesus is.

But there is a direct sequel to the gospels. Luke wrote a two-volume masterwork. He wasn't finished when he completed his gospel. Acts is the second half. And Luke didn't see it as a “sequel.” It was “the continuing story of Jesus.” Luke uses careful wording at the beginning of Acts to tell us what his first book was about – “all that Jesus began to do and teach.” You might think that since Luke's gospel takes us to the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, it was through. But that's not the way that Luke looked at it. That was just the beginning. Acts is the continuation. This is the first thing Luke intends to teach us – Jesus isn't done just because He physically left. Jesus is still alive and active and working in the disciples.

But more than that, the pattern that Jesus sets for us is to teach and to do. Words and deeds – neither one alone is enough. Jesus taught, and He proved what He taught by what He did. That's why the title of our new series is Words and Deeds, and as we study through the book of Acts, we'll see how the early church launched and started the movement that grows around the world today. We here today represent the continuing legacy of that original movement – we've inherited it from our parents in the faith.

So let's start at the beginning. Luke mentions Theophilus. That's the same person Luke mentions at the beginning of his gospel. It's not an uncommon Greek name, but it's unique because it means "lover of God." Theophilus probably helped pay for Luke's travels and books – authors in that era credited their patrons for their help. But was that really his name, or was it a pseudonym? We don't know. The cool thing is this – if you love God, then this book was written for you. It names you. You are the person Luke intended to read it. Lots of letters in the New Testament are written to specific churches and pastors, but this one has our names on it.

Next – Luke's intro gives us the idea that Jesus teaches the disciples through the Holy Spirit after His resurrection. Now Jesus always taught by the Holy Spirit; the Spirit rested on Him when He was baptized by His cousin John the Baptist; the Spirit was always with Him. But the disciples themselves are often clueless during Jesus' ministry. Many events and teachings in Jesus' life, the disciples don't understand until after the resurrection, after Jesus teaches them what it all meant.

It is as if God makes a clean break between the two eras. Before the resurrection, the Spirit is still working; whenever the Spirit is influencing a disciple, Jesus' message sticks. But the Spirit isn't always around. Even the faithful don't know the Spirit's continual presence, and when He's not there, they flounder. When Peter first calls Jesus the Son of God, Jesus calls Peter blessed because that truth has been revealed to him by the Spirit. He didn't come up with it on his own. Yet in the same hour, Peter rebukes Jesus for saying He will go to Jerusalem to die. The Spirit gives insight, but even Jesus' closest friends are clueless when the Spirit is silent or absent.

But now, Jesus is teaching and the disciples are getting it. It is this post-resurrection teaching that fuels their ministry. It is what enables them to tell the story accurately and clearly and to properly interpret Jesus' life. The Spirit's power is becoming more and more evident. When the Spirit is moving, it's like the light bulb that has been out for so long finally comes on.

Luke continues. "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." The resurrection isn't a one-time event, something you can chalk up to a mass hallucination or a single made-up story. Jesus showed up several different times. He appeared to the women in the garden by the tomb, both individually and collectively. He appeared to two men who were part of the larger group of disciples on their trip to Emmaus. He shows Himself to ten of the apostles; He then appears again when Thomas is with them. He appears to them by the Sea of Galilee and officially restores Peter. He appears to them on a mountain in Galilee where Jesus told them to meet Him. He meets them in Bethany, on the Mount of Olives, where His ascension to heaven takes place. All told, over 500 people saw Jesus raised from the dead in the forty days after His resurrection.

Also, Jesus proved He was alive. On multiple occasions, He eats with them. Now eating was a sign of friendship, but it also proved that Jesus was not a ghost. Jesus makes the point Himself – a spirit without a body can't touch anything and can't eat. This was huge because they knew Jesus wasn't just a spirit, that He had been resurrected physically.

Sometimes modern people think it makes sense to still trust in Jesus if there wasn't a physical resurrection, that some sort of spiritual one was OK. But that's because our modern thought has been infected with Greek philosophy that the body is bad and the spirit good. Jewish thought was that the body and soul were linked; none of Jesus' Jewish disciples would have been satisfied with just a spiritual resurrection. No, Jesus' proofs were to show them that His personal body they could see and touch was real.

So Jesus has instructions for them: don't leave Jerusalem. Wait here, because in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. And this might be the first thing that gives us a particular teaching for today: *being in the center of God's will is the safest place to be.*

The disciples were avoiding Jerusalem. Some of them headed for Emmaus at the end of Passover. The apostles, the remaining 11, are hiding in the Upper Room where Jesus had His last meal with them. Some go back to work fishing on the Sea of Galilee, nowhere near Jerusalem. It's on the mountain in Galilee that Jesus tells them that their new job is going to be taking His story back to Jerusalem, then out into the Gentile world.

Jerusalem wasn't safe for a Jesus follower. The religious authorities were furious that rumors were spreading that Jesus was alive. Despite armed Roman guards at the tomb, there was no body. They paid the guards to say they'd fallen asleep at the tomb and grave robbers must have carted it off – even though the penalty for falling asleep on guard duty was death. The authorities handled the Roman officials too. If they were willing to put an innocent man to death, if they were willing to bribe officials to keep the truth quiet, what would they do to Jesus' most loyal followers? Going back and staying in Jerusalem was terrifying.

Yet the promise is that the Spirit would come to them when they waited in Jerusalem for His arrival. God knew the risks. He knew how frightened the disciples would be going back to the city that they were sure hated them. Why couldn't they wait in Galilee, back at home for many of them, back where things weren't so tense, where they weren't wanted men?

No one can say for certain, except that obedience to God is never about what's easiest or what makes the most sense to us. There are countless times when God asks us to make good choices based on what He's said to us in Scripture. But obedient choices get us into trouble with others; obedience doesn't always make logical sense; it is painful, burdensome, scary. But clinging to the promises of God is the only truly safe place to be.

Logic and common sense would have said that when Church of the Covenant closed four years ago now, my family should have moved to greener pastures and you all moved on to other churches. Except that wasn't what we believe God wanted. Having church Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons didn't make much sense. CrossWay has not been an easy road. Yet here we are, 30+ people here on Easter, now Sunday mornings, rent free. God is good!

There might be something in your life God is calling you to do, or something God is calling you to give up, some conversation God is calling you to have or a relationship God is calling you to speak into. May be now, may be later. And you're going to have to decide: am I going to do what's easy, or am I going to do what God is asking? Choose God's way. It may seem dangerous, but God's way is the only way that's truly safe in this world.

Moving on: the disciples understand a lot, but their questions show they don't understand everything. They ask: is Israel's Kingdom going to be restored now? They're saying, "You're back, everything's good, so are you going to come as conqueror now to make Israel the nation above all nations? Do our dreams of greatness come true now?" And Jesus says, "It's beyond your pay grade to know when God is going to what He's going to do. But you'll receive power when the Spirit comes, and you'll take my message and my story everywhere by that power."

Lesson number two: *God's reality is far better than your hopes of what He'll do.* God's plan was to give the disciples power so they could spread God's Kingdom far and wide. God said, "What you want to happen, I'm going to start through you, and I'm going to give you the power that will make it happen." The disciples' dreams are far too small. They are still thinking about the nation of Israel triumphing over Rome. What God has in mind is His eternal kingdom triumphing over the entire world and making billions of Kingdom citizens along the way. The disciples had no idea just how their lives would affect the history of the world going forward.

Sometimes, we're sick and we think, "God, heal me, 'cause this thing is terrible." Yet we don't have a clue of how many lives are affected by praying for our healing or changed because they are transformed through taking care of us or moved by the grace they see in how we handle the struggle. God uses our sufferings to shape His new reality so that more people come to Him.

We pray that someone in our family would have faith without realizing that God wants to strengthen our faith by using us as the means by which they're saved. You think, "Well, maybe the pastor will visit the sick." "Maybe the pastor will feed the poor." God has it for all of us to do those things, every one of us! Since the time of Acts 2, which we'll reach in a couple weeks, each believer has the spiritual birthright of the Holy Spirit. We have been given the same power given to the apostles – not to use in the same exact ways, perhaps, but no less the same Spirit.

God doesn't fulfill all our dreams. He didn't fulfill the apostles' dreams of the restoration of Israel the way they thought it should happen. He had a better dream, one that is still working out right now. If your dreams aren't coming true, if God isn't responding like you think He should to your prayers, re-evaluate. Is it because your dreams are too small, too focused on self and what you think you need? Because God wants to move us past ourselves into His plan. And His plan is perfect, far far better than anything we could come up with on our own.

Finally, we reach the ascension. Jesus is taking up into the heavens before the disciples' eyes. This is profound. There are echoes of the great men of Israel's history – Enoch, who was righteous before God and didn't die, who simply was never seen again because God took Him. Elijah, who was taken up into heaven in a chariot, in a whirlwind, before the eyes of his own student Elisha. Can you imagine someone literally being pulled into the sky in front of you?

Only a few people have ever witnessed something this amazing, so spiritually moving, so faith building. Sometimes we refer to mountaintop experiences, times often on retreats or times away with God, where God seems super close, where He is very very real to us, where we just think, “Ah, finally, why isn't it always like this?”

And then two angels show up. Another miracle! Yet these guys are Debbie Downers. They call the disciples back to Earth. “What are you looking at? Jesus has been taken into heaven, but He'll eventually come back the same way.” It's like the disciples would have sat there until the end of time waiting for Jesus to come back unless the angels hadn't said, “stop it.”

And that's our final lesson today: *we need mountaintop experiences with God, but there's also work to be done back down here in the valley.* Everyone needs to connect and reconnect with God in a deep way. If you've never done a spiritual retreat where you've had time away from the world to spend with God, you need it. Jesus modeled it when He left His disciples on a regular basis to get away and pray and connect deeply with the Father. Women, I invite you to participate in the Priscilla Shirer mini-retreat coming up later in the month. Men, I'm looking for some way we can do the same thing in the near future.

We need moments away from work and phones and the busy modern lifestyle to focus on our relationship with God. The experience the disciples had, seeing Jesus be taken into the heavens, we know that times like that got the disciples through incredibly difficult persecution. They took that time with Jesus and He gave clarity and fulfillment to their faith.

But that's not where we live. When we were in Gatlinburg, we saw tons of mountaintop cottages. It was incredibly awesome to see. But all the work happens down in the valley. People visit the mountaintop, rent a cabin there, but they come back down to reality eventually. God meets with us in mountaintop experiences, but He gives us those experiences so we have fuel for the journey ahead. He shows us His love and grace so we can share them with others. He helps us feel close to Him so we can grow close to people who are hard to love. God gives us a glimpse of His glory so we can give ourselves willingly to His purposes.

It might have been awesome to live on that mountain waiting for Jesus to return for a few days. But it would have been disappointing to sit there for Jesus not to come back. Jesus rarely meets us in the same way in the same place twice. We know that from coming to church every Sunday. Some days, the music is moving and the sermon catches your attention and you feel close to God. And some days, the music is blah and the sermon is blah and everything is blah. Yet we keep coming back because we know we've heard Jesus here and we'll hear His voice again. But in-between services, there's work to be done out in the world. We come here to be refreshed and to go back out as God's people. We can't just sit around waiting for God to meet us here all week. Weight Watchers would kick you out!

God is moving in this world. Through the resurrection and the ascension, we see Jesus fully as Lord and Savior, and we see a new act to His ministry begin. Let's stick near Him and find our safety and security. Let's trust His unfolding of the future to come. Let's enjoy those mountaintop moments that give us strength for the valleys to come. As we do, we will find true and lasting joy.