

**Witness in the World**  
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**Acts 1:6-14**

<sup>6</sup>So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” <sup>7</sup>He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup>While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup>They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward 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.”

<sup>12</sup>Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

**John 17:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup>since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup>And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup>I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup>So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

<sup>6</sup>“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup>Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; <sup>8</sup>for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. <sup>9</sup>I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. <sup>10</sup>All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. <sup>11</sup>And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

A good friend of mine picks up litter whenever he sees it and is always kind to wait staff and store employees, in any circumstance. He doesn’t ever make a show of it but I couldn’t help noticing. For a while after noticing this about my friend, I simply held him in admiration. And then I began to wonder to myself why I hadn’t been doing the same things and I made up my mind to follow his example. The disciples seem to travel a similar path in today’s readings. Chronologically, the story in John comes first and the disciples think they understand Jesus’ message loud and clear. When we get to Acts, they are

still relying on Jesus to be the one making the difference, taking action, but all that changes after the ascension.

To really understand any biblical text, it's important to remember that the small portion we read in any given worship service is meant to be understood in the context of the whole Bible, especially in the context of the words that precede and follow that little bit. Today's readings are no exception so I'd like to share with you some more about the framework for the story we hear from John today. A large portion of the gospel of John, from chapters 13 -17, which includes this morning's reading, is considered the Farewell Discourse. Structured in a rough question-and-answer format, various disciples ask Jesus brief questions, to which he responds with lengthy replies. These replies spell out his work, which he considers completed, and explain "his relation, both to believers and to the world, after his glorification."<sup>1</sup> It is after these explanations that the disciples truly, finally, understand what Jesus has been teaching them. Indeed, just before today's reading, they come right out and say, "**Now** we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God."

What follows today's reading is the story of the passion, which we know from our traditional readings during Lent. In chapter 18, Jesus heads to the garden to pray and then we read about his arrest, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. But just before that, in chapter 17, we read the end of Jesus' Farewell Discourse. He has explained everything he felt necessary to the disciples and, fittingly, Jesus closes in prayer. We get to listen in as he reports to God that his work is complete, having given eternal life to all those whom God gave him. Eternal life, he explains, is "that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Not surprisingly, Jesus teaches even in these final private moments with the disciples. He continues his prayer - for those he leaves behind, until the time when he returns. In another example that his work on earth is complete, he affirms that the believers do indeed understand, saying, "They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me." They have been prepared for what will come next.

The disciples have received the words from God and they believe that God sent Christ. It is these enlightened followers of Christ who we encounter at the beginning of the book of Acts, from which we read this morning. Credited to the same Luke who is also the writer of the gospel of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles is exactly that, an accounting of the actions of the apostles of Christ in the time immediately following Christ's resurrection. Verses 1 - 5 are brief, introducing the writing to its initial

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<sup>1</sup> New Oxford Annotated Bible, footnotes on 13.31-17.26, p. 172 New Testament]

recipient, Theophilus, and informing the reader that the apostles were staying put in Jerusalem to await the promise of the Father, as Jesus had instructed them. Before his ascension, Jesus stayed with the apostles and we begin today with a question they posed to him.

They said, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” These poor followers never seem to catch a break; they so often are portrayed as a bit dim, maybe even clueless, and this question doesn’t counter that portrayal. While they thought they fully understood the purpose of Jesus coming, they were still somewhat missing the mark, distracted by their own agenda, their own hopes for Jesus’ work on earth. In short, they were human. Who among us can claim to have discerned God’s will clearly every time? Not everything is crystal clear - not to them and not to us. It is why they, like us, look to Christ for clarification and why we, as Presbyterians, consult the witness of those who have come before us in faith.

Knowing that they have received his words and have believed that he was sent by God, Jesus, as always, guides them to comprehension. He replies, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” Essentially, that is not important; what *is* important, he goes on to tell them. “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.” And with those words, he was gone, lifted into the heavens.

In striking similarity to the resurrection account in Luke, two men in white appear to those gathered. After the resurrection, they say to the women at the tomb, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” After the ascension, these men in white say to the men who witnessed the events on the mount of Olivet, “why do you stand looking up toward 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.” The similarities end here.

Where the apostles doubted the women’s recounting after the resurrection, there was no doubt after the ascension. And where there was mourning and hopelessness before they accepted the resurrection, the apostles went forward from the ascension with hopeful anticipation of what was to come. They returned to the upper room, where they were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer” as they waited for the Holy Spirit. It seems they finally really did comprehend. Jesus was no longer with them physically but he was present and still among them. They have the life, the works, the teachings, and the resurrection of Jesus to witness to, making him present to others as well.

As I said at the beginning, it is important to know what precedes and follows the texts we read and so we recall that the remainder of the Acts of the Apostles does indeed describe the acts of those who

began the church and it also describes the challenges faced by the early church. They struggled with how to witness and how to witness well. These same struggles still face churches today for there is no easy answer. We are each, as churches, and as individuals, called to witness in unique ways. We remember that Paul tells us there are many gifts and many parts which make up the body of Christ.

We do, however, have a guide as to how to seek the answers, and that guide is right before us today. We read, “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 Alpheus, 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.” They were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. Things had changed. They knew they were to be witnesses but they were not certain how, so, together, they prayed as they waited for direction from the Holy Spirit.

For more than 160 years this church and her people have been witnesses in the world. We have received the words given to us by Christ and we know in truth that he came from God, have believed that God sent him, and have witnessed to those truths. That witness has taken on many forms, from a long-standing partnership with Carroll University to Meals-on-Wheels to being the home church of the first female moderator of General Assembly to the Mariner’s Club and Rebekah Circle and the Wednesday Bible Study. Some of those forms of witness have stayed the same, serving as anchors for the work of the church, and some forms have changed. And some of those times of change were marked and sealed by the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Those times, undoubtedly, were characterized by much prayer and much waiting on the Holy Spirit. Now is another time of change for this church. Some of the ways in which we are witnesses in this world will certainly remain the same and, if we pray and wait for and listen for the Holy Spirit, surely, we will be shown new ways of witness, too.

The apostles prayed together as they waited on the Holy Spirit. Let us be of that same mind, praying together as the congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha. I ask you, as we embark on the next leg of our journey as witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, as Christians, to join me in prayer each day. Your prayer need not be complicated - you can invite the Holy Spirit with words as simple as “come, Holy Spirit, come.” And prayer, as you know, is not merely a one-way correspondence. As you pray, be sure to listen, too, for the whispers of the Holy Spirit, watch for the movement of the wind of the Spirit among us, and wait for the gentle touch of the Spirit upon you. Learn from the disciples in this way, too: be mindful not to be distracted by your own agenda, your own hopes for the church’s work on earth. Should that line be blurry, as it so often is for us, trust that Jesus will guide you, too, to comprehension. And *then* let us share with one another all that we have heard

and seen and felt so that, together, we can discern how it is we continue our witness in this world.  
Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Let us pray: Holy Spirit, you have been with us from our very beginning. We ask you to move among us now, affirming our many gifts and uncovering new ones which we might use in service to Christ's church here in this place, to the people of this church, of this community, of this nation, and of this world. We pray that you open our ears that we might hear you, our eyes that we might see you, and our hearts that we might receive you. Amen.