

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourth Sunday after Easter, May 18, 2014

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 506, 408:1-3, 512, 496, 410.

Lessons: Psalm 100, Acts 1:1-14, Luke 24:42-49.

Sermon Text: Acts 1:1-5.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Luke introduces the book we call “the Acts of the Apostles” or just “Acts” by telling his readers, and he names one of his readers, “Theophilus”, which means “lover of God”, what happened to Jesus after he rose from the dead. You just heard that ***“After his suffering, [Jesus] 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.”***

Today we look at

JESUS PREPARING HIS DISCIPLES FOR THEIR CALLING

- 1. He appears to them a number of times.**
- 2. He teaches them and gives them instructions.**

As Jesus appeared to his disciples during those 40 days, he preached and taught and especially prepared them for their work on earth as his representatives. The book of Acts will give an account of the work of his servants.

Luke recorded very similar words in our Gospel lesson this morning. Luke in his gospel ended with a summary of the risen Lord’s instruction to his disciples, his promise of the Holy Spirit, and his ascension. Acts begins with a similar summary and sets the stage for the history of the early years of the New Testament church to be recorded in Acts.

The expression ***“Jesus began to do and to teach”*** simply means that Jesus did it. We could add that he finished what he began. This text tells us that Jesus was meeting with his “apostles”.

The apostles he had chosen were the eleven as listed in verse 13, after Jesus’ ascension into heaven. They are ***“Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.”*** (Acts 1:13) Judas Iscariot was dead. The word apostle means someone sent out, in this case sent out by Jesus to deliver his message.

We read in John 20:21-23 that Jesus told them: ***“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*** The Spirit of God was present and active in the lives of these men even before Pentecost. They were instructed to preach God’s gospel and God’s law.

At various times during those 40 days Jesus stood among these men, spoke with them, showed them his hands and feet, invited them to touch him, and he ate. Paul tells us in First Corinthians (15:6) that on one occasion more than 500 believers saw him alive. Thus Scripture tells us: ***“After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.”*** He appeared again and again so that there would be no doubt that he had risen and was alive.

Jesus had taken a number of opportunities to show himself as their living Savior to his disciples. They had seen him suffer; they had received the evidence of his death. As a result of all this, he gave them not only one, but many proofs of his resurrection from the dead. During a period of forty days he was seen by them on

various occasions. And every new appearance was another link in the chain of convincing and giving sure evidence that he was living. He appeared to Mary Magdalene; to the women returning from the grave; to the Emmaus disciples; to Simon Peter; to ten of the apostles with other disciples also being present; to the eleven disciples a week later; to seven of the apostles in Galilee; to James and to 500 brethren at one time; and to the assembly of the disciples on Ascension Day.

He spoke about the kingdom of God, which is not a place but an activity. For a kingdom you need three things: a king, a place to rule, and subjects to rule over.

The kingdom of God is not a physical place where God rules but it is his ruling activity. God rules in people's lives by the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Jesus ***"told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.'"*** (Luke 24:46-47) From the entire Word of God we know that his kingdom is not political but spiritual. We know that it is not limited to the Jewish people but includes all believers, the spiritual Israel. We know that our Lord will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead.

So for God's kingdom, the three necessary things are God as the king, ruling in the hearts of his subjects, who are all who believe.

Jesus said ***"I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*** (Luke 24:49) Luke restates that here: ***"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about."***

The gift which Jesus' Father promised is the Holy Spirit. The words 'promise' and 'gift' remind us that the Holy Spirit does not come by our activity or effort but by the power of God and from God. Even the apostles could only wait for him, trusting God's promise. They, just as all who believe, received the baptism of the Spirit solely as a gift, never as a reward granted on the basis of human effort.

"For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." The promise of the Holy Spirit, of a baptism with the Holy Spirit, had been preached by John the Baptist as he announced the coming of Christ. John said ***"I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."*** (Luke 3:16) John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the apostles had received the forgiveness of sins and John very likely had baptized at least some of them with water. But they too were to receive in the future what John calls 'the baptism with the Holy Spirit' which would give them the power to do their work as Jesus' apostles, just as Jesus promised immediately before he ascended into heaven. ***"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."*** (Acts 1:8) The story of Pentecost in the second chapter of Acts describes how this promised gift; this baptism with the Holy Spirit was given.

Just as Jesus was the Father's ambassador, so they should be ambassadors of Christ. Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians about ***"God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."*** (2 Corinthians 5:18-20) Those words also describe the work of the followers of Jesus, who were to go forth preaching repentance to a sinful world and encouraging them to ***"Be reconciled to God."***

All the things that the disciples had witnessed, Jesus' entire work, his suffering, death, and the resurrection, were necessary in order that the writings of the Old Testament should be accomplished in him.

How often didn't Jesus have to do what Luke tells us at the end of his gospel: ***"Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures."*** (Luke 24:45) Sin-darkened hearts need the Word of God to open their minds and hearts. And we know that ***"the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."*** (Hebrews 4:12) Jesus proclaimed the Word of God, for he is the Word of God.

The contents of their ministry are summarized very simply in the words ‘repentance’ and ‘remission of sins’. To receive the forgiveness of our sins and with this to then receive eternal life through penitence and faith in the risen Savior is the main theme of all of the Word of God from beginning to end.

The Holy Ghost must make them strong for the task. Jesus had already breathed on them and communicated to them a portion of the spiritual strength which they require, but according to the father’s pledge, they would soon receive the Spirit in greater measure.

That he tells them to remain in Jerusalem until they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit makes it clear that it was only after the full outpouring of the Spirit, which happened on Pentecost, that they should then begin their work. They had to be prepared.

The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost is the Spirit of power and will give them power to proclaim God’s Word faithfully. Paul writes ***"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."*** (2 Timothy 1:7)

Jesus began the work of the Gospel and committed it to his disciples so that they might continue it. The teaching of Jesus continued, in a way, even after his resurrection, although he then no longer spoke before the general public, but only to his followers. In the days up to the day of his ascension, he strengthened his disciples, especially his apostles and he gave them a commission, a calling, as you heard in last Sunday’s sermon from Matthew 28. (19-20) ***"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."***

At every appearance of the risen Christ his conversation and instructions to his disciples concerned matters of the Kingdom of God. He committed to them the truths and commands they were to teach and follow. In word and in deed the apostles – and all disciples of the Lord – are to proclaim that Kingdom. The one great message of the Church for all times must be the acceptance of Jesus the Redeemer by faith, for this is the only way in which anyone becomes a member of the kingdom of God.

We can understand that his disciples would have been apprehensive about going to places far away to tell about Jesus and his work. Who wouldn’t be about going to start a new calling ‘somewhere in the world’? But as it turned out, they were often moved along also by other forces in their lives. Even those who didn’t devote 100% of their lives to the work of spreading the Word of God were led to go throughout the world, so that by their lives and their words they could tell of Jesus and his marvelous work of salvation.

Sometimes their jobs – what we would call secular jobs – would take them elsewhere. Jews were often adventurous merchants, going to other countries to pursue business ventures. Persecution, especially a generation later – about 40 years later in 70 A. D. – would also force them out of Jerusalem and Palestine.

And the world was never saturated with the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. Satan and his allies are fighting the truth of God’s Word everywhere, and are even content to share people’s minds and hearts with God, as long as they aren’t eradicated. And, of course, even every believer always has his or her sinful flesh fighting against his new man as he seeks to live a God-pleasing life.

But Jesus’ disciples were to learn from God and his Word – at this very time only the Old Testament was written – and to make that a part of their lives.

And so are we to make the Word of God – both the Old and New Testaments – part of our lives. Just as Jesus prepared his first disciples to proclaim, to tell, to teach his Words, so he prepares us – through our reading and hearing and studying the Word of God. May God continue to fill our hearts and lives with his truth so that we, too, may be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Amen.