

“Why Are You Standing Here?”

(A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Eastertide—Ascension Sunday)

Text: Acts 1:1-11 [Psalm 104:24-35; Matthew 28:16-20; I Corinthians 12:3-13]

Subject: The Great Commission

Desired Response: Discover how it is essential for you to be a witness for Jesus.

How To: The “Cotton Ball” reminder.

How Long: Make a commitment this morning, find someone to hold you accountable, and keep praying and looking for opportunities to witness for the next 30 days.

Sermon in a Sentence: “God not only sends His children out into the world as His ambassadors, He gives them key resources to enable their witness for Him.”

Worship Theme: “We worship God who sends us forth into the world to make disciples.”

The Book of Acts was written by one of Paul’s closest companions, Dr. Luke. The whole purpose of the book is to show us a group of men and women who got to work in order to become a vital and active church, empowered for God’s purposes by the Holy Spirit.

The Book of Acts covers a period of approximately 30 years. It begins with the final marching orders of Jesus before He ascends into heaven. It ends with the imprisonment of the Apostle Paul in Rome. Along with Luke’s Gospel, these are the only New Testament books written by a non-Jewish author.

As a writer, Luke’s purpose is history. This was his second historical piece. His first volume, also written to his friend, Theophilus, was a chronicle of the life of Jesus. In this second volume, we learn that Luke is concerned with five major themes:

1. The continuation of God’s purposes throughout history;
2. The mission and message of Christ;
3. The progress of the church despite opposition;
4. The inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God; and
5. The life and organization of the early church.

The Book of Acts begins with these verses, found in Acts 1:1-11:

¹ *In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.*

³ *After his suffering, he presented himself to them 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

⁶ *Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"*

⁷ *He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ 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."*

⁹ *After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*

¹⁰ *They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "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."*

So, Luke begins by summarizing. He reminds Theophilus that his first volume discusses what Jesus did and taught. Jesus had suffered. His arrest, trial, abuse, and crucifixion were no accident. The passion of the Christ was a divine necessity for the redemption of sinners.

But, the suffering of Jesus was not the end of the story. He rose from the grave, victorious over sin, death, and Satan. Luke tells us that there were many infallible evidences of the risen Christ.

The period between Easter and Ascension Day—officially celebrated this past Thursday, as well as today—marks the end of Christ's earthly ministry and the beginning of the work of the Church. For 40 days, Jesus walked, taught, and fellowshiped with His disciples. He spoke about the Kingdom of God, both present and future. He informed them that God would one day rule. He shared with them that God would soon rule in *their* lives, as well.

Jesus cautioned His disciples not to leave Jerusalem. They were to remember Jesus' conversation with them in the upper room where they had celebrated the Passover. It was on that occasion Jesus promised to send His Holy Spirit to comfort, guide, and teach them. The baptism they experienced in the Jordan River would be nothing compared to being immersed in the overwhelming power of the Holy Spirit!

The disciples, even after all they had experienced, were still concerned with temporal, political concerns. They still wondered if Jesus would free Israel from the Roman occupation. Jesus reminds them of what He had told them on another occasion, as recorded in Mark 13:32, that not even the angels or the Son, but only the Father, knew the day or hour of the triumph of God's Kingdom.

Rather than timing, they must be concerned with a task—a task we call the "Great Commission." Jesus' gave final "marching orders" to His disciples: they were to be His witnesses—a charge that would change the world.

A witness is one who affirms a fact or an event. This confirmation is usually to someone's advantage. In this case, the advantage is ours. This Great Commission, in addition to its citation here, appears in all four

Gospels—that makes five mentions in the first five books of the New Testament and underscores its importance in God’s plan for the world.

After Jesus gave His final instructions, He was taken up from them. A cloud, reminiscent of the cloud at the Exodus, symbolizes for us the glory of the Lord. Jesus is gone. He has returned to the right hand of God the Father. He has been seated there in glory!

Whenever I was supposed to be helping my father with some project or another, he used to always say to me, “Dean, stop standing around with your hands in your pockets.”

If the disciples had pockets, guess where their hands would have been. They were standing there, intently looking into the sky. Wouldn’t you? They were looking for Jesus. Two men appeared, dressed in dazzling white. It is obvious that they were angels.

“Why do you stand here?” they asked. Jesus has gone. “He’ll come again in the clouds. Get your hands out of your pockets! Don’t dawdle! He’s given you a command. Hop to it!”

I believe we need to hear the same question the angels asked the disciples that day on the Mount of Olives: “Why do you stand here?”

I read a study that says that only two percent of believers have ever introduced another person to Jesus Christ! Why are we standing here?

Jesus told His disciples, in that upper room before his arrest—as recorded in John 15:8-16—that disciples must bear much fruit. What kind of fruit was Jesus talking about? Some people say the fruit of the Holy Spirit, those character qualities God would see in us: love, joy, peace, etc. Others say no, Jesus was concerned with evangelism.

Listen to these words of noted Christian author, Dr. Bill Hull:

The healthy Christian’s nature will reproduce the fruit of the Spirit... The fruit of the Spirit is much more than personal evangelism, but fruit bearing without personal evangelism is unthinkable... The church must guard against the belief that you can bear fruit, be pleasing to God, but not share your faith. Not even one reproducing believer fails to share his faith. Not even one disciple fails to share his faith.

If the Spirit is producing love in us, we will be compelled to share that love with others. If joy comes to us from the certainty that a relationship with Christ is ours, we will share that joy, not hoard it. If God’s peace has rescued us from the spiritual war that leads to destruction, we will become ambassadors of that peace.

I read recently that 50% of the world’s population has still not heard the Gospel. Without a commitment to the Great Commission, world evangelization will continue to limp along behind the population growth. Based on how many people come to Christ each year and how many professing Christians there are, I read that it takes 1,000 Christians 365 days to introduce one person to Christ. We must ask ourselves whether or not we find that acceptable. And, we must ask ourselves what will we do to change this.

The Book of Acts teaches us that we are empowered for God’s purposes by the Holy Spirit! The Book of Acts teaches us that the church exists for mission. Without oxygen, a fire dies. Without mission, the church does not exist.

In contrast, the church does not exist to maintain an organization. The church is meant to grow. And, the church grows when the members become more effective in obeying the Great Commission of our Lord!

Are you discouraged? Don't be! We have good news this morning. *“God not only sends His children out into the world as His ambassadors, He gives them key resources to enable their witness for Him.”* Let me say that again. *“God not only sends His children out into the world as His ambassadors, He gives them key resources to enable their witness for Him.”*

You may ask, “So, what are these resources and what do we do with them?” Please, let me explain:

Resource No. 1: We have God's provision.

I suppose one reason to stand around with your hands in your pockets, rather than sharing the life Jesus gave you, is the fear of not knowing what to say or how to say it. The good news this morning is that we're not alone. Jesus promised that His disciples would be “baptized with the Holy Spirit.” The same is true for followers of Jesus today! When the Holy Spirit revealed to you that Jesus has issued a call for you to follow him and you acknowledged, “Yes Lord, I'll follow you!,” immediately the Holy Spirit of God came into your life. He is there right now, never to leave you.

Ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit came upon the infant Church with great fanfare, great power, and with a symbol of flaming tongues of fire. Although you and I did not hear the fanfare or see the fire, the same Holy Spirit has come upon you and me. The same Spirit who enabled Peter to preach on Pentecost will, if you allow Him to, enable you to share the message of Christ with your next-door neighbor, or cubicle mate at work, or fellow student in your school, or the other moms or dads in your social group. The same Spirit who empowered Paul to lead a young man named Timothy to Christ, will enable you to lead your very own children to the Lord, as well.

We must recognize that we are not alone. The Spirit of God encourages us. He directs us. He reminds us of Jesus' words in the Scriptures, so we can share them with people around us who need the Lord.

In order to bear fruit in evangelism, we must allow God's Spirit to produce fruit in our lives. We must also avoid quenching the Spirit. Like pouring a bucket of water on a fire, when we say “no” to God's Word, we become ineffective followers of Christ. We, like the disciples on the mountain, can gaze into heaven all we want. We can intently stare at our Bibles. We can spend hours on our knees. We can listen to every Christian broadcast. But, I believe, if we are truly sensitive to God's Spirit, we will hear the words of the two men dressed in white: “Why do you stand here?” It's great to read your Bible, pray, and listen to the Word preached. But there is a job to do! God's Spirit is our provision, our very first resource to assist us in being obedient to the Lord's command!

Resource No. 2: We have God's power.

Jesus told his disciples that when the Holy Spirit came upon them, they would receive power. We might stand around with our hands in our pockets because we don't think we have the ability to testify for the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we are Christians, we have the Holy Spirit. If we have the Holy Spirit—or, perhaps more properly, if the Holy Spirit has us—we have the power of God! This word “power,” used 118 times in the New Testament, indicates the power of God made available to His servants! We get the English word “dynamite” from the New Testament Greek word used here!

Notice these words from Romans 15:13:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

When dynamite goes off, things around it are not the same anymore! When God's Spirit brings His power into our lives, things should not be the same any more. It is time for us to light the fuse!

Paul told the Corinthians, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5:

⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

How do we light the fuse? How do we demonstrate the Spirit's power? I believe the power flows through the cord of obedience. Paul simply did what Jesus told him to do. He was transformed by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and he proclaimed the risen Christ. How can the power of God for outreach explode in us? By simply obeying Christ's words. This brings us to our third resource:

Resource No. 3: We have Christ's program.

What words are we to obey? Let's get our hands out of our pockets and hear Jesus' words from Acts 1:8 and obey them:

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."

Simple words, aren't they? Most of us are familiar with these words. We've been able to quote them for years. But, God is not really interested in how well we can quote Acts 1:8. He is concerned with how effective we are in obeying Acts 1:8!

Remember, a witness is one who affirms a fact or event to someone's advantage. A witness tells what he or she knows. God's program is that we begin where we are (Jerusalem) and tell what we know. We are to confirm the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. We are to tell people what Luke told Theophilus: what Jesus did and taught; how He suffered; how He rose from the grave. We are to share that Jesus has made a difference in our lives!

When the provision of the Holy Spirit comes upon us, we receive the power of God. The natural result—or should I say the supernatural result—is that we become Christ's witnesses. I really don't think we choose to witness; rather we choose ***not*** to witness. Jesus said, "**You will be my witnesses.**" It should be automatic for a believer, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to witness. When we are not witnessing, we have made that choice. I wonder, do we really believe Acts 1:8 is the **GREAT** Commission?

What can we do as we leave today? We can walk away the same, with our hands in our pockets. I hope not. Or, we can walk away with the renewed realization that God's Spirit lives within us to give us His dynamite of power, as we obey Him and witness to the saving acts of Jesus!

We should do this because... "*God not only sends His children out into the world as His ambassadors, He gives them key resources to enable their witness for Him.*"

Resource No. 4: We have God's promise.

The angels reminded the disciples of a promise Jesus made earlier in the upper room on that Passover night. He told them that He would be going to prepare a place for them and that He would also come again.

As the disciples gazed into the sky, the angels said, "Get to the job, boys. Jesus is coming again. You saw him go up in the clouds. You'll see him return in the clouds."

You see, we need to walk out of here and take our hands out of our pockets. Jesus is coming again! That promise will bring us comfort and joy. But, it should also bring us a desire to be faithful and committed to his marching orders for us.

If Jesus had returned this past week, would He have been pleased with our witness? What if He returns this week? Whether you are with people just like you in Jerusalem or with people at the ends of the earth, let's be faithful and fruitful disciples of Christ.

This morning, I have a basket of cotton balls here in the front of the church. Once the service is over, if you would make the decision to take your hands out of your pockets and redouble your efforts to be a faithful, obedient disciple, who desires to be a witness for Christ, I'd like you to come up and take one. I'd like you to keep it in your pocket, on your dresser, or on the dashboard of your car.

Why a cotton ball? It is to serve as a reminder of that cloud that took Jesus up, and also to remind us that He's coming again in the clouds. This cotton ball is to remind us that this morning we are making a commitment; I want to urge you to pray for opportunities to be a witness for Jesus during these next thirty days. Ask God to open some doors, so you can share your faith, invite someone to church, or serve them with the kindness of Christ this month.

Also, find someone to hold you accountable. Find someone who will come to you at least once a week and ask, "Are you praying? Did God open any doors? Were you able to share the love of Christ with someone?" And, you do the same for that person.

Why are you standing here? Our heavenly Father is saying, "Stop standing around with your hands in your pockets! There's work to do!" At the end of the worship service today, I ask you, "Will you please come up and get your cotton ball?"

"God not only sends His children out into the world as His ambassadors, He gives them key resources to enable their witness for Him."

- Resource No. 1: We have God's provision.
- Resource No. 2: We have God's power.
- Resource No. 3: We have Christ's program.
- Resource No. 4: We have God's promise.

"God not only sends His children out into the world as His ambassadors, He gives them key resources to enable their witness for Him."

Amen.