

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.”

Ephesians 1:15-23

15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people,

16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,

19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength

20 he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,

21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

22 And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,

23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Luke 24:44-53

44 He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

46 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,

47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

48 You are witnesses of these things.

49 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.”

50 When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.

51 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.

52 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

53 And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Sermon

Introduction (Name + Title + Role + New Member @ Epiphany)

Thanks for Invitation (Brad)

You are witnesses of these things. You are witnesses. To be a witness is a core identity of every Christian. To be a witness isn't first a spiritual gift, but an experiential reality: we have witnessed the living Christ and so are called to tell others about what we have witnessed. We are witnesses of these things.

What things? If we love to tell the story, as the old hymn declares, what story are we telling? We're telling of the incarnation, that God took on our carne, our flesh, the meat of humanity (yeah, that's why they call it carne asada at your favorite mexican restaurant). We're telling the story that the Kingdom of God has come near in Jesus, that the body of Jesus brought heaven to earth. We're telling the story of Christ's miracles and forgiveness, of his compassion to the outcasts and prophetic rage toward the religious insiders who tried to use God's inclusive love as a weapon of exclusion. We are witnesses that our sin was so strong that it, that we, forced death upon the one who gave

us life, that we used an unjust court system to convict the giver of life to an absurd death. We're witnesses that even in death our sin wasn't strong enough to keep Christ's love from bursting forth, and so Jesus rose from the grave, once again in a body that ate fish and had scars and spoke audible words. We are witnesses of all these things.

Today, we're witnesses of Jesus ascension, which at first glance appears somewhere on the spectrum between alien visitation and "beam me up, Scottie," But as the creed reminds us, Christ, God's Word, is now seated at the right hand of God, judging the living, or the quick, and the dead (and yes, that's where the movie title came from). Now that the living word of God has ascended to another phase of existence, we're commissioned as divine witnesses, to share the fullness of the story in Jesus's bodily absence. Jesus no longer speaks through that body, for he now intends to speak through us, the Body of Christ.

That's the commission of Christ's ascension. Jesus leaves the world while some, many, most still don't know of his life, much less his death or resurrection. Yet, he empowers us - those who've known him, who've loved him, who've followed him from life, through death, and into eternal life - he empowers us as witnesses.

This is a historical reality of our faith. Who wrote the Bible? Witnesses.

It's even built into human nature. Why do you tell your friends about the excellent vacation you took, the phenomenal meal you ate, the mesmerizing concert you attended? Because you were compelled as a witness to share the good news of what you experienced.

For many of us, especially those of us who have recently served jury duty or binged a few seasons of Law & Order: SVU - how is that show still on the air, by the way - we first think of witnesses as serving in a courtroom. Now, the content of a witness's job is the same, to tell the truth about what they've seen so we can make a best judgement about what truly happened. Yet, in a courtroom, the reason a witness is there is because a crime was committed, because someone is guilty, because something terrible has happened.

Christians show up because something wonderful has happened. We're all declared innocent, and Christian witnesses show up to declare the truth of grace, absolutely unmerited and eternally effective grace. In the words of today's Gospel, we're witnesses that preach, in the name of Jesus, **repentance for the forgiveness of sins to all**

nations. We're witnesses that what the world needs most - love and forgiveness - is readily available in the arms of Christ.

Yet, such a message, of true equality and unconditional forgiveness challenges our presuppositions about what we've earned in our culture. It's often met with resistance, and at times, death.

In Greek, the word for witness is *martys*. You might know that's the same root word for martyr. In their willingness to face death, martyrs witnessed to the absolute truth of God's Gospel in Christ. Witnesses, in the Christian sense, take the task of telling Christ's story so seriously that they're willing to give themselves up for the story, to lose themselves in God's story and, if necessary, for God's story. Martyrs are witnesses that tell the good story of God and face the discomfort, the difficulty, with courage.

You. Are. Witnesses. Along with the martyrs and standing in their legacy.

Martin Luther King Jr. as a martyr *par excellence*. Not just because he died, but because his witness was reproductive.

The example Dr. King offered us, perhaps better than any martyr on this continent, is that Christian witnesses produce other witnesses. For Dr. King, this meant a witness to God's transformative love that created all people equal and makes all people equal despite the prejudice and oppression so common to our human experience. As a pastor of the Gospel, he reminded us, that even in the face of horrendous racism, "hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." But what makes him a paradigmatic Christian witness isn't just the message that he shared, but his relentless sharing of the message, such that others became witnesses too.

Not only was the Bible written by witnesses.. It was written to inspire witnesses to make more witnesses. Not only was Dr. King a witness. He witnessed to create more witnesses. Think of it like a verbal virus. Viruses are parasites, so they invade other cells and then transform those into more viruses. Luke's words today, and truly, all of Scripture, enters us with the intent to transform us. That's what Dr. King found in the prophetic witness of Jesus, and what he spoke as a witness to our country.

The church today needs witnesses. Clergy shortage. Lower attendance. Aging demographics. Fear. Rather than

lament, we can retake the mantle Jesus gave us 2,000 years ago and become witnesses. It's time to reclaim our identity as witnesses of the ascension, and even more, Jesus' entire body of work. Indeed, when witness to the fullness love found in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, we become the Body of Christ for the world.

That's the joy of my work, witnessing and helping to raise up the next generation of witnesses. You might recognize this place, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, where we form leaders for Christ's church at work in the world. While the building is historic, and the artwork moving, these are the witnesses, the ones who make this place come alive.

You almost might recognize this place, Capital University, where we're transforming lives for a brighter world. Buildings, and even institutions, don't brighten the world. These people are the witnesses who bring the light of Christ to the shadows.

We, the church and the world, need more of these people. We need witnesses that produce other witnesses.

I'm inviting you today to help us grow these witnesses. To help amend our clergy shortage, we need to raise up more leaders in the church. To raise up more leaders in the

church, we need more young people in our communities. To welcome more young people in our communities, we need someone to invite them, to bring them, to be a witness. It's time for us to ascend to the call Jesus placed on us, to become witnesses that produce witnesses. How is God calling you to be a witness? How is God calling you to make more witnesses?

Let me tell you briefly about two ways that you can make an impact this year, growing witnesses as undergraduates and seminarians. This fall, for undergrads at Capital, we're rolling out a new program of weekly meals as a part of an initiative to grow community and reduce food insecurity on Capital's campus. We're asking for churches like Epiphany to commit to sponsoring one meal a month, whether by contributing funds or cooking it and bringing it to campus. This way, we grow community, meet the needs of hungry students - and yes, we do have many students on campus who face hunger issues - and through that, we bring witness to the love that Jesus has for us all, including our bodies and full bellies.

Another insecurity we're facing as a denomination, one that I've already mentioned, is the future of ordained leadership. Across the ELCA, there are 600 congregations that could afford pastors or deacons currently without a

rostered minister. Pastors are also retiring at rates much quicker than we are ordaining new pastors and deacons. Now, to be honest here, we must admit that there are many LGBTQ+ candidates who are waiting for a call, as well as people of color and women who have more difficulty finding calls. Yet, even when we've found the right call for each of these leaders, which is something we must commit to as a church, we'll still be short hundreds of pastors. We need new leaders.

That's why I'm inviting you to consider two things: first, identify someone in your life who you think would be a good pastor and tell them that they'd be a good pastor. Maybe they've been feeling that internal call but have never heard that good news, that someone else sees their god given gifts arising to meet the needs of the church and world. You can also fight the narrative about pastors job stability.

And second, consider as a congregation joining the new Congregational Partners Program at Trinity Lutheran Seminary. One of the biggest hurdles to people becoming pastors is the amount of educational debt they carry. Rev. Todd Mills, our Congregational Relations Director, has developed a congregational partnership program where every single cent donated goes straight to scholarships for

seminarians. Part of our witness as people of God is investing in the future witnesses who will lead our congregations, pastor our campuses, serve as chaplains in hospitals and the military, even become a bishop one day. I've left this information with Pastor Brad and hope that you'll consider both options as a congregation.

Of course, there are a plethora of other ways to witness, which begin with what I call normalizing God language. Often we're afraid to talk with other people about faith because we don't want to seem like pushy street preachers, but the right response isn't to not talk about faith at all. It's to speak of the God that we know: the compassionate God who comforts us in our fears, the brave God who leads us beyond our wildest dreams, the silent God who sits with us in our fears, the loving God whose image we see in all people, of all races, and all genders, and all sexualities, and all ethnicities, and all abilities. If we're going to witness about God, we've got to learn to talk about God.

Whatever Christian witnesses do, we're ultimately known by what we say and do. Like Dr. King, we're called to lives of witness that inspire others to become witnesses. So here, on this ascension Sunday, let that identity, witnesses of Christ, be known. You are witnesses of the ascending

grace of God. Rise now, each of you as signs of grace, and make new witnesses of these things.