

**Sermon: Ascension Sunday**

**St. Peter's, Norfolk**

**Text: Acts 1:1-11**

**Date: May 27, 2020**

**“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)**

Before her death in 1997, Jeanne Calment was the oldest living human whose age could be verified by official documentation. Born in France, and having lived there her whole life, she credited her longevity to three things: olive oil, port wine, and chocolate!

At her 120<sup>th</sup> birthday party, someone asked Mrs. Calment how she would describe her vision for the future. With a twinkle in her eye she replied, ***“Being 120 years old, I would say that it’s very brief.”***

Today’s New Testament reading from Acts (chapter 1) is about a vision for the future; actually it’s about a clash of visions for the future. Jesus’ disciples had a very brief and exact vision- it was simple. Now that Jesus had risen from the dead, they were certain that he was going to re-establish Israel’s earthly kingdom. God’s chosen people would be restored to power and overcome their Roman oppressors. Israel would once again be a world power- politically and militarily. Everything was looking good!

But once again, the disciples were not prepared for Jesus’ agenda (his ***“vision”*** for the future). ***“You guys think I’m just talking about a kingdom in Israel?”*** he might have said to them. ***“Well, hold on to your hats, boys, because I’ve got something much bigger in mind- how about a kingdom that covers the whole world?”***

Today is Ascension Sunday- the day we recognize and remember Jesus’ leaving earth, his ascension into heaven. But, as you can see, before Jesus could ascend and return to the Father, he still had some work to do. He had to expand the vision of his disciples.

When I was a boy growing up in the small village of Mt. Penn, Pennsylvania, I marked the boundaries of the outside world by the nearest ***“big city”*** I knew- Reading, Pennsylvania. Every time I wanted to exaggerate a distance, I would say,

***“Wow! That’s as far away as Reading!”*** because that’s as far as I had ever traveled.

However, the first time my parents took me to Philadelphia, a real big city some 60 miles away, I was exposed to new sights and new experiences- things like subways, skyscrapers, and Automats; and the boundaries of my outside world were expanded. Over the past thirty five years or so, I’ve been fortunate enough to have lived in Northern Virginia (near Washington D.C.) and Dallas, Texas and Norfolk and Virginia Beach. I’ve also enjoyed traveling to Canada and the Caribbean Islands, Aruba, and Belize in Central America. And so Reading, Pennsylvania is no longer the outermost boundary of my life. That’s been expanded.

But it’s sad (I think) that some people will never question the limits placed on their lives. It’s sad to think that there may be little children growing up with a Reading, Pennsylvania horizon (figuratively speaking) with parents unable or unwilling to help them understand how limiting it is to stop all your dreams at Reading- with no one willing to take them to Philadelphia and places beyond.

The disciples’ vision was like that. It was small. You might say it stopped at Reading. They were planning for an earthly throne of power centered in their Reading- Jerusalem. But Jesus was planning a world invasion- not of might and force, but of love and truth and peace. And so Jesus shared his vision with the disciples.....

First, he wanted them to spread his message in Jerusalem and in all Judea. Well, that seemed simple enough....until you realize that Jerusalem was where Jesus had been crucified. The local authorities were still looking for his disciples. At best, the disciples could expect persecution...at worst, death.

Judea was the larger region surrounding Jerusalem. Jesus wanted them to go there. Perhaps the disciples could travel with some anonymity in Judea. But even in this larger region, they would face some obstacles. All of the disciples were from Galilee, and Galileans were not well-received in the surrounding regions. Jews even made fun of the Galilean accent, in the same way we might make fun of a Texas drawl or someone from Boston when they ***“Paak the Caar.”***

And Jesus also wanted the message taken to Samaria. This was even more shocking. Samaria had been settled by Jews who had intermarried with pagan peoples. They didn’t practice the orthodox Jewish faith. Samaritans were called ***“half-breeds.”*** There were generations of hatred and suspicion between the

orthodox Jews and the residents of Samaria. Why would Jesus offer a message of hope to the Samaritans? Being sent into Samaria was like being sent into enemy territory.

And finally, Jesus' followers were to take the Good News to the ends of the earth. Did that mean the countries of the Gentiles? Did he really expect them to share the message of the kingdom of God with Gentiles? This was beyond the disciples' imagination. They couldn't yet wrap their minds around the enormity of this task (this vision). It seemed impossible! And so, before Jesus could ascend to the Father, he needed to expand the horizon of the disciples; he needed to re-define for the disciples ***"what is possible."***

Jesus vision was possible because Jesus promised they would receive incredible power to help them. The task was to spread the Good News to the whole world that God came to earth in human form (Jesus, His Son), that He conquered death, and that He offers eternal life to all who would believe. And because this is a superhuman task, it can only be accomplished through supernatural power. The disciples couldn't appreciate it just yet, but Jesus was about to give them a power far beyond anything they had ever experienced- the power of the Holy Spirit.

As I mentioned in last week's sermon, the Holy Spirit is ***"Christ alive in us- Immanuel forever"***; and so, all of the works that the disciples had seen Jesus do- preaching, teaching, inspiring, comforting, healing- they would be able to do.

You see, Jesus had to depart (ascend) in order for his power to descend. And that power would be absolutely necessary because Jesus wasn't calling the disciples to just be his witnesses. The word that Jesus uses in Greek is ***"marturas"*** from which we get our modern-day word martyr- a person who makes a great sacrifice for, or even dies for his/her faith.

As it turned out, of the twelve men who were closest to Jesus, almost all of them suffered and died for their faith. Countless others (men, women, and children) have done the same throughout the centuries. The power of the Holy Spirit is the power to make great sacrifices. It is also the power to face death if necessary for the cause of Jesus Christ. Only the tremendous power of the Holy Spirit can give us the courage to stand firm under any circumstances and preach the Good News of Jesus.

The great preacher Dwight Moody was once asked if he thought he had enough faith to be burned at the stake as so many early Christians had been. ***"No,"*** was his

reply. ***“Well, do you wish you had that kind of faith?” Moody said, “No, because I don’t need it today. What I need right now is the faith to live in Milwaukee for three days and hold a revival. But,” he added, “If the day ever comes when I need the faith to be martyred, I know that the Holy Spirit will provide me with it.”***

The disciples were promised faith sufficient for each day and each task. Jesus was leaving them- but not without comfort, hope, and help. In fact, the One who had been with them (Jesus) would now be the Spirit in them. And what a difference it would make in their lives.

Peter, our church’s name sake, who was such a weak and impulsive man (who often spoke and acted without thinking) would, because of the Holy Spirit in him, become a man possessed! He would be possessed with the power to heal and power to raise the dead. He would be given the wisdom to preach and start churches and share the Gospel message through the writing of letters. This transformation happened to Peter because of the Spirit living in him- because of Christ in him. For Peter, the “*impossible*” suddenly became possible.

My friends that same power, the power of the Holy Spirit, is promised to us (Jesus’ 21<sup>st</sup> century disciples) just as it was to the first disciples- the promised power and faith sufficient to do the things God has called us to do. You may not yet have the grace and faith sufficient to do what He will have you doing five years from now.....or 3 years from now.....or next year....or even next week.

But through His Holy Spirit, God will empower you (when you need it) with the grace and faith needed to accomplish each and every task that He calls you to do each and every day. All you need to do is accept the call and, like those first disciples, put your faith into action and trust in Jesus’ promises.

In 1939, Nazi forces invaded Poland. They began a campaign of terror against Polish Jews, killing hundreds and forcing thousands more into ghettos. A local businessman, Oskar Schindler, offered to hire a number of Jewish workers to work for very low wages in his factories. Throughout the course of WW II, Schindler hired and protected over 1,300 Jews in his factories. Through bribery and black-market connections, he was able to keep his Jewish employees from being sent to concentration camps.

Leopold Page was number 173 on Oskar Schindler’s list of 1,300 Jewish employees. After the war, Page spent years searching for a writer who would tell

the story of Schindler and his incredible saving act. Finally, an author named Thomas Keneally took on the task of writing the book, *Schindler's List* which was later turned into the award winning movie by Steven Spielberg. Perhaps you've seen it.

Before his death, Leopold Page said, ***"I didn't know how I would do it, but I promised Oskar Schindler I would make him a household name."*** Leopold Page did that. He dedicated his life to spreading the story of Oskar Schindler- the man who had saved his life.

Like Leopold Page, Jesus' first disciples didn't know how they would do it, but they would dedicate their lives to making *Jesus Christ* a name known throughout the world- and we should be doing the same because that's what disciples do! Sound impossible? It's not.

When we leave someone, we typically say ***"Goodbye."*** Did you know that *"good bye"* is actually a shortened form of an old blessing- ***God be with you?*** This was exactly the blessing that Jesus was leaving with his followers those many centuries ago- and even today. And if we truly share Jesus' vision of bringing the Good News of the Gospel to the world, then nothing will be impossible for us because God is with us and God is in us, strengthening us and empowering us through His Holy Spirit to do the things He has called us to do. Amen.