

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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Thursday, May 5, 2005

Ascension

Luke 24:44-53

Pastor Randy Ott

You Will Be My Witnesses

Did you ever tell someone to do something, let's say a child, only you made the mistake instead of saying, "Do this," you said, "Will you do this?" In the child's mind, they said "No, I won't do this." They went on their way and it didn't get done when you thought it would get done. There is a little bit of difference when you just switch the verb and the subject around, isn't there? You will do this. Will you do this? Sometimes I'm not careful in saying this to my children and I come home to find that they answered, "No."

Jesus is not careless. He leaves us with no excuses. He leaves us with no semantics to hide behind. He says, "*You are witnesses of these things.*" "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Not—you should. Not—it would be nice if you would. Not—could you, would you please, pretty please would you. But simply straight forward, "You will be my witnesses."

This is God's plan. He lived and died in our place to take away the sins of every last person that ever would walk the face of the earth. That message the Holy Spirit uses to create saving faith in the hearts of the people he died for. But to get that message to their ears so the Spirit can work in their hearts, he uses us. He doesn't use the angels who don't get tired. He uses us who get tired and think to ourselves that we should get up and do something, but then we decide the batteries in the remote are working just fine, so we stay seated. This is God's plan. "You will be my witnesses."

When we look at our own hearts and we look at our own lives, do you ever think to yourself that Jesus could have come up with a better plan than this? Well, he didn't. This is the best plan he had and this is his only plan. For the message of salvation to get out, he relies on his people to be his witnesses. As we look at these words from the Gospel of Luke today, we are reminded that he doesn't leave us without direction, without power and without promises. He says to us that we will be his witnesses with minds that are opened by Scripture. If you think you are frail, he is going to strengthen you. If you think you don't know what to say, he will teach you. That is what Jesus says. Then he reminds us that a part of being his witnesses is having mouths that are open to praise him. We see the apostles in the grip of 120 believers doing this even before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. That is what we see in our text this evening. "You will be my witnesses with minds opened by Scriptures."

Here are some guys that needed their minds opened by Scriptures. Their minds at times were clouded by the misconception of their day—the misconception that the Messiah would come to establish an earthly kingdom. Some of the same things that

move books off the shelves today and make a series that is a best-selling series—the promise that the Messiah will come and establish his kingdom here on earth—the Left Behind series. The answer to this misguided notion of the day, of Jesus' day and of our day—Jesus *opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures*. They were looking for a glorious kingdom on earth and Jesus said, “Here is what it has always said in Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms—the Old Testament. All these Scriptures testify about me and here is what they said—*The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day...*” It's there in the Old Testament. No doubt he took them by the hand and led them to Psalm 22 and led them to Psalm 16 and Psalm 19 and Isaiah 52 and Isaiah 54 and Isaiah 53 and showed them all of these things.

They needed to see it. They needed to understand that the Messiah was not just the glorious king who is going to rule eternally, but first he is the suffering servant who establishes an eternal kingdom that is not on this world by living and dying in the place of all sinners. That misconception that the Messiah would establish an earthly kingdom—you can understand it, can't you? It is a lot more appealing. Do you think more people would listen, humanly speaking, if we would say that Jesus Christ came to bring prosperity and power in this world? Do you think that would catch more people's attention? Become a Christian and you will never suffer again—no more tears will be shed—to our earthly mind that sounds like a much more attractive message. Sometimes our itching ears chase after those who proclaim that message, but that message is wrong. That's not what God's Holy Spirit had been inspiring from the time of Moses to the time of the apostle John. The message that he inspired was one that the Messiah would suffer and die so that we would have an eternal home, not just a temporary peace in this world, but to bring peace between us and God—a peace that does not exist because you and I are sinners. A peace that is needed because we are born in sin, and we are born spiritually blind, and we are born enemies of God, and we can't lift our eyes higher than this world on our own because we are spiritually dead. We can't see beyond the tip of our nose, figuratively speaking. We can only see this world. But God opens our eyes to the power of his Spirit to lead us to see that there is something more. We have a loving God who broke down the wall of sin that divided us through his life and death. He tore it down, brick by brick. He established peace between us and him. He took away our sins. He tells us now that since those sins are forgiven, even though we will shed tears as we die in this world, even as we face anxiety and uncertainty and worry and distress—we have one who loved us enough to give us heaven, at our side watching over us, guiding us and loving us.

Your minds are never going to come up with that answer on your own. If you try to go through life on your own analyzing what you see and what you experience and what you feel in your emotions, you are never going to find that answer. The only place that you are going to find that answer—that you have a God who loves you and is holding you up with everlasting arms—is in God's Holy Word. It is the power that is in us and among us. That is the same power that was exerted when Christ was raised to the right hand of God, and he is ruling over all things with that power. When we come to the Lord's Supper and receive his very body and blood, we are plugged in to the power of God that sustains us and strengthens us and equips us to be his witnesses. We have a message then that every person in this world—EVERY PERSON IN THIS WORLD—longs to hear. They just don't know that Jesus is the answer. They might not know it because

they don't see it in our lives always. They see us moping and complaining and whining and groaning just like everyone else does. We don't always live in the confidence of this power because we don't always live with our minds opened up by the Scriptures. So at times, even when we are not speaking about Jesus, we are giving a witness that is not the witness that in our heart of hearts we desire to give.

But Christ died for those sins also. Scripture opens our minds to see that, and that moves us to want to share Jesus with others. God's love for us in Christ touches us so that we want to go out and preach repentance and forgiveness of sins. Repentance—Godly sorrow over sin that does not lead to despair but that leads a person by the hand to the foot of the cross of Christ to see where that sorrow is washed away. Repentance that leads to forgiveness—repentance that is forgiveness because it includes faith in Jesus—that's the message we proclaim. The place where we are equipped to speak it is going to be in Word and Sacrament.

When the Word and Sacrament work in our hearts, the Holy Spirit opens our mouths. You see it already in this group of a hundred or so believers. We are told with joy after Jesus' visible presence left them—with joy they returned to Jerusalem—*with great joy* they returned. They worshipped Jesus. *And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

Already before the Holy Spirit was poured out into their hearts on Pentecost Sunday, they stayed there praising God. No longer locked away behind closed doors fearful that others might see them or hear them—no longer fearful that they might get arrested—but with minds opened by the Scriptures, they were empowered to do what they once were afraid to do.

Remember who this group of people consisted of. Fishermen, tax collectors, guys who all ran away on Maundy Thursday, scared for their very lives, guys who denied Jesus and would rather rot in hell than admit that they knew him. That is who Jesus used. These same people, when their minds were opened by the Scriptures, when they were empowered by the Holy Spirit, stood in the temple courts and praised God.

We might think we don't have the gifts and abilities to do these things. Maybe we don't. But it is not our power, it is not our eloquence, it is not our gift of speech—it is mouths that are opened by the Holy Spirit that have strengthened us through Word and Sacrament. Mouths that speak the simple truth that children in the balcony know—GOD LOVES US. He loves us even though we are sinners. He loves us so much that he lived in our place and died in our place and gave the Holy Spirit to us to lead us to believe that Jesus is our Savior. Mouths opened to praise God for who he is and what he has done—it is amazing when you consider what he has done, when you are confronted with the truth of who we are.

That's what the apostles and this group of believers did. They opened their mouths, they praised God, and then they continued to do so after Pentecost. They continued to do so until the Lord called them home. That is the privilege God has given us. We get to keep proclaiming his praise until he calls us home. Never doubt that it is a privilege.