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Acts 1:1-11

9 May 2021

### Jesus Leaves

I started driving tractors before I learned to drive a car. But in either instance, both of my parents were not always so keen on teaching me, nor were they terribly interested in riding along. I could always tell when I was not driving the way that my dad would want me to because his whole body would get physically tense, and he would struggle to speak what he wanted me to do without cringing or shouting as if I was going to wreck the vehicle, tractor or car, in that instant. Teaching his 5 boys to run machinery was probably worse on my dad's health than all of the rest of the farm-work combined. On many different occasions, I told dad that his presence alone was part of the reason that I was not operating as well as he expected. But I understood also that Dad did not want to get out of the tractor either because he really wasn't too sure if I was ready to operate the machine at all. Sooner or later, though, just like allowing your child to get in the car by themselves for the first time, so Dad sooner or later had to let us drive the tractor by ourselves. It was in those moments that I learned the most and gained my confidence in operating lots of different machinery and vehicles. I always joked with dad that it was always better for him to just not ride along even long after I had been operating the machine by myself because that same tension would always fill the entire cab when he sat down in the buddy seat or passenger seat. In fact, I often found myself letting him operate whatever it was just so it wouldn't be so intense and we could actually talk about something other than how I was operating that particular day. I'm sure you all are identifying with these experiences in a

multitude of ways, but I want to hone in on one specific piece of wisdom that I think comes into play in our text this morning, which is that it was only when Dad left me to operate on my own, of course, with his training filling my decision-making did I really learn to operate successfully. Dad leaves, and I carry on the work in the spirit of how dad had taught me.

We continue to walk in the way of the resurrected Jesus, joyously proclaiming his victory over the powers of death, empire, evil, and destruction. We wait, as the disciples did, for Pentecost, a fresh out-pouring of God's Spirit, the advocate sent in lieu of Jesus's absence. We earnestly await the return of our King and Lord, our savior and redeemer, our hope and life, our example and inspiration. In the meantime, in the here and now, we take on the mantle of the first apostles, the mission of the first followers of Jesus to witness to all that had happened and that continues to happen in our world today as God's powerful new creation bursts forth in the midst of our world's suffering and brokenness.

Our scripture text from the book of Acts continues the story that we have been studying since Easter. Jesus is risen. Vindicated by God almighty and shown to be the true Messiah, the promised savior and leader of Israel, Jesus has done for Israel what Israel could not for itself, what we could not do for ourselves. We listened to the stories of Jesus's appearances to the disciples in Emmaus and Jerusalem and Galilee. Jesus is alive, his scars and physical presence are proof of what resurrected life in God's new creation will be like, wholly different from us yet still somehow similar. The resurrected Jesus seems able to walk through walls. The resurrected Jesus eats food like we do. The resurrected Jesus walks and speaks and appears just like any other person, but something has changed. The holes in his hands, feet, and side are still observable, so pieces of his life before resurrection carry on. Still, the disciples struggle

throughout these post-resurrection stories to understand what has happened and what it means. Even in today's passage, the disciples still have not understood.

The book of Acts is the sequel to the gospel of Luke. In fact, the story that we are exploring this morning is also mentioned at the end of Luke's gospel. In the first three verses of chapter 1, Luke summarizes his entire first letter, mentioning Jesus's ministry, his suffering on the cross, his resurrection, and his ascension or when Jesus is taken up into heaven. Luke's audience, Theophilus, may or may not be a real person or friend of Luke. His name means "lover of God" or "beloved of God," so it also might be Luke's special way of addressing the Christian community as God's beloved children. When we had explored the last chapter of Luke several weeks ago, it seemed like all of Jesus's resurrection appearances took place on the same day, but it must have been longer. Just like Jesus's temptation in the wilderness and Moses's experience on Mount Sinai, the resurrected Jesus spends 40 days with the disciples before he is lifted up into heaven. Mentioned 32 times in Luke's gospel and now early in Luke's second letter, the Kingdom of God is vitally important to understanding the message of Jesus. All that Jesus had shown throughout his ministry had come true, in that God's power was working in and through him to bring healing and hope to all people, not just Israel, but starting with Israel.

After Luke's introduction in verses 1-3, he begins the content of his second letter in verses 4-5 with a reminder from Jesus to his disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they have received the promised power-source. Jesus had started his ministry with this same promise: John the Baptist was baptizing with water, a common occurrence in the first-century Judean wilderness for those who knew that Israel was still in exile, not on God's path of obedience and righteousness. But in Jesus, something new and old was happening. The prophets had spoken long ago of the coming time when God's spirit would be poured out on all people. In the first

testament, God's spirit had empowered specific people, including the prophets to encourage and inspire the people toward life that honored God's covenant, but God had spoken through some of the later prophets of a time when God's spirit would come, not just for his chosen people. We are on the verge of this moment as Jesus leaves and the disciples wait.

After setting the stage with the promise of the Spirit, Luke writes in verse 6 that the apostles or 12 disciples all come together again in Jerusalem. I wonder if this gathering is the moment that the disciples have returned from Galilee, from their meeting with Jesus along the seashore. Remember that Jesus had reminded Peter and the rest of the disciples that Jesus's death and resurrection were not to be ignored. The disciples could not go back to life as it was before they met Jesus. I wonder if they are all coming back together in Jerusalem at this moment, as Luke describes it, because Peter and a few others have called them back together to be with Jesus again. Maybe some had gone their separate ways, uncertain of what to do after what had happened, uncertain if they really believed that Jesus was resurrected.

Though they have spoken with and experienced the risen Christ, the disciples still, and I mean still, have not fully grasped what is happening, which is shown by their question at the end of verse 6. You might be thinking that I'm being harsh with the disciples, but we can see a lot of ourselves in them. We hear about Jesus's resurrection every year around this time, yet we still are not convinced of what to do in light of it. How do we respond to the power and hope of resurrection? The disciples, though, ask Jesus if now is the time finally that Jesus will restore Israel's status as a powerful and independent nation, freed from the grip and stranglehold of the Roman Empire and able to establish God's kingdom by raising their own army and defeating their enemies. In case you haven't picked it up in the last few sermons, the disciples' vision of God's in-breaking kingdom is not at all what Jesus has taught or shown them thus far, which is

exactly how Jesus responds in verses 7 and 8. Jesus tells them first that they will never know the exact times or moments when empires will fall and world powers will fail or when God will finally and surely set the world aright. Obviously, the risen Jesus sitting with them is the sure sign that God's project of setting the world right has begun and will be completed one day, but Jesus's followers' work, our work, is not over, which is what Jesus is trying to tell the disciples. Basically, in verse 7, Jesus tells his disciples that it's none of their concern when God decides to do what God decides to do.

Instead, they must focus on their mission, the mission that Jesus had begun with his ministry, which was rudely interrupted by his unjust trial and crucifixion, a humiliating death, but was proven true in its vision by his resurrection. In verse 8, Jesus tells them what they want to hear, which is that they will receive power, but it is not the power that they have been seeking and envisioning over the last 3 years. They have been expecting the kind of political power that Pontius Pilate and the High Priest Caiaphas have exercised in their actions toward Jesus. The disciples want to sit in the seat of power, take hold of the reins and steer the nation of Israel toward the vision of God's kingdom that they had always been told would happen, except by Jesus. They want to crush their enemies, the Romans especially, but also all of the nations around them who have laughed and scoffed at them as they have tried over the past several hundred years to establish themselves again as their ancestor David had. But Jesus's vision is not this bloody revolution or conquest, in which God's crushes all of Israel's enemies by force and establishes Israel's rightful place as God's chosen people among the empires of the world. Jesus's vision, instead, requires sacrifice, laying down your life for others, for all nations.

So, what kind of power is it that Jesus is promising his disciples, and by extension, us? Jesus promises the disciples that the Holy Spirit will fill them with the power to bear witness or

enthusiastically tell the story of how God is renewing all of creation through Jesus. Though the disciples have been focused almost entirely on their own ethnic and national interests in the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel, Jesus tells them that they will not only witness to what Jesus has done in Jerusalem, but they will go beyond Jerusalem into the regions around it and beyond, even to the ends of the known world at the time. A small sidenote: this moment when Jesus explains how the gospel message will spread across the Roman empire through the powerful witness of the disciples becomes the outline for the rest of the book of Acts. The disciples witness first in Jerusalem, but as the story continues, Christians carry the message of Jesus throughout the empire, even to the capital Rome where the apostle Paul tells the message of Jesus in Caesar's own city. What God has accomplished through Jesus is not only meant for Israel but for the entire world. As God had promised Abram so many years ago, his offspring would be blessed so that they could then bless the nations. Like new wine breaking old wineskins, the story of Jesus is going to overflow from Jerusalem to the rest of the world, calling all people to deep relationship with God, each other, and creation and proclaiming that the true way of being human has been paved by the promised Messiah, the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

In verse 9 then, Luke writes how Jesus is lifted up again, but this time, not on a cross for all people to see. Like the great prophet Elijah in his chariot, Jesus is lifted up, enveloped by a cloud, and taken to heaven to be seated at God's right hand as the true lord of all of creation, which leaves us with this final scene. The disciples are still gazing up at the sky, wondering I'm sure where Jesus has gone, when two men in white robes, heavenly messengers, ask them why they continue to stare. The two men tell the disciples that Jesus has gone, but he will come just as they had seen him go, a promise and seed of hope for them as they await the spirit's power. Just as the disciples had returned to their work in Galilee, uncertain of what to do with Jesus's

resurrection, they stare up at the sky outside of Jerusalem wondering what to do now, astounded that Jesus has left them, again. Their hopes are dashed as they realize that they will not be governors or kings or princes or generals, but maybe it is in this moment, as Jesus leaves, that the disciples begin to realize that their original vision of the kingdom was completely wrong. Maybe just as in Galilee along the sea, the disciples are starting down the road that Jesus has been leading them this entire time, the way of service and love, sacrifice and mercy, hope and life.

But I wonder if it took Jesus leaving them behind at that time for them to really take seriously the mission that Jesus had taught them. Just like the young bird, whose parents leave it behind in the nest, no longer to bring it food anymore, the disciples must learn to fly on their own with the help of the Spirit. Like a young kid, whose dad leaves him in the drivers seat to run the machine on her own, the new operator must finally do the work without the teacher there. Jesus leaves, but Jesus does not leave them alone. How often have you wondered as the disciples did why Jesus left you behind? Life is overwhelming and difficult and nonsensical and ridiculous. It feels like Jesus has left you all alone to face all of it on your own as I'm sure the disciples felt as they walked back into Jerusalem to face authorities and powers that were fully convinced that they had won, that they had eradicated Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus leaves to take his place in heaven, but he does not leave the disciples or us on our own to live out his mission. The spirit's power is coming. Pentecost is two weeks away, the time that we celebrate that God's spirit fills us and moves in us and empowers us to carry on Jesus's mission in the here and now. We are witnesses to how Jesus has changed everything. Unlike the disciples, we do not stare at the sky wondering when Jesus is coming back. Only God knows, but we continue Jesus's work here in Freeman and in South Dakota and around the world.

Finally, as the disciples will realize in the rest of the book of Acts, we realize too that the spirit's power in our lives is not a power over but a power under. As Mennonites, we focus on the spirit's power to enable us to do the difficult parts of Jesus's mission. We embrace our enemies and resist evil and revenge by the spirit's power. By the spirit's power, we seek out those who have been left behind and considered useless by our culture or society. In the spirit's power, we refuse to hate or abuse our neighbor for our own gain or pleasure. We learn to say I'm sorry and seek healing for broken relationships by the spirit's power. We hope beyond our own suffering and seek to relieve the suffering of others by the spirit's power. By the spirit's power, we choose to live and live fully into Jesus's way and witness to how becoming like Jesus can change our communities and our world. When Jesus leaves, are you trying to build your own power or are you living in the power of the spirit?