

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
“To the Ends of the Earth”
Acts 1:1 – 11

Today, we begin a new sermon series, on the book of Acts. Acts is one of those books that people tend to feel strongly about. For some, it is an ideal for every time and place, and for others, it is simply too fantastical to believe. Acts *is* fantastical; it's replete with stories of miracles, sudden death, and dramatic conversions. It's also very earthy, with stories of generosity, shipwreck, persecution, and joy.

So much happens in this book. And *so much* has the potential to shape us as Christians and as a Christian community, that we have decided not to rush through it. As your lives have been slowed down and you have paid attention in ways that you never have before, so *we* have chosen to slow this down, and to take the entire summer to cover this book. Even *then*, we won't get through everything; there's so much here!

Let's start with some background. Acts chapter 1 verse 1 says, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach.” What *was* that former book? Let's take a look at Luke chapter 1 verse 3. It says, “Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” The author of Acts is also the author of the Gospel of Luke. Luke is Part One, which is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And Acts is Part Two, the sequel to the story of Jesus.

The book of Acts covers what happened with the church in the years following the life of Jesus, a span of approximately 30 years. And there is so much that happens in the book of Acts, that it is often called the “Acts of the Apostles” or the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.”

The long held belief is that the author was a man named Luke, a physician and a Gentile convert to Christianity. He was a companion of the apostle Paul, and an eyewitness of many of the accounts in the book of Acts.

Now that we have a bit of background, let’s get into our text for today! In verse 3, it says that after Jesus was resurrected from the dead, he showed himself to his disciples, with many convincing proofs. He did this to show that he was not simply “spiritually raised” from the dead; he was resurrected with a *body*. He appeared to his disciples over the course of forty days, and showed them that he had a body like ours, but also *not* like ours. He ate, walked, talked, and was recognizable to them. He also was at times *not* recognizable and would shock them by suddenly appearing and then disappearing. His disciples at first thought he was a ghost!

In verse 3, it says that during those forty days that Jesus appeared to his disciples, he spoke to them about the kingdom of God. Let’s pause here for a moment. When we think about it, this is *surprising*. Jesus didn’t berate them for being terrible disciples and abandoning him in his hour of need. He didn’t tell them that they now needed to be good people. He didn’t tell them that what they did on this earth didn’t matter because they would go to heaven anyway. He spent his time with them speaking about the kingdom of God.

This was no new conversation. During his three years with them, he spoke *frequently* about the kingdom of God. He spoke about it in metaphors. He said that the poor would inherit it. He instructed his disciples to pray that the kingdom would come, on earth as it is in heaven. In Matthew and Mark, his first sermons were: *repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!* (Matt 4:17, Mk 1:15). Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God a *lot*, so perhaps it's *not* surprising that he spoke about it during those forty days.

As many of you know, both of my grandpas were pastors. My mom's dad was of hardy Norwegian stock, stoic, and *emphatic* in the pulpit. I remember him as this elderly man jumping and pounding his fists onto the pulpit, proclaiming, "The kingdom of God is *now!* The kingdom of God is *now!*" As a little girl, I didn't know what to make of my grandpa when he did this, but I couldn't help but think that he was a cute old man. I'm sure that if he were to hear me now, he would *not* appreciate me saying that.

I didn't understand his fervor or what he meant by saying that the kingdom of God is *now*. I believed, like many Christians, that when we die, our bodies remain on earth, and our souls go to heaven. I believed that the earth would one day be discarded because it would be of no use. In some odd way, we would live somewhere above the clouds with the angels in this ethereal kind of place. Cherubs with harps and streets of gold wasn't far from the image that I had of this future life.

It wasn't until seminary that I learned that the Bible *doesn't* speak about our souls going to heaven. The Bible in fact, speaks of us receiving *new, perfected bodies*,

and Jesus one day coming *down* to make all things right. The dwelling place of God will be with *us* (Rev 21:3).

A few months ago, Pastor Jim preached on the topic of the resurrection in our sermon series on 1 Corinthians. I recommend that you watch that sermon and read the chapter on the resurrection in his book, *What the Bible Doesn't Say...And What It Does: 7 Things that May Surprise You*. I know this topic provided some pretty intriguing conversations for our Grow Groups!

So what did my grandpa mean when he pounded his fist into the pulpit, yelling that the kingdom of God is *now*? Could that be true? We have had numerous reminders lately that life is *far* from what it should be. There *shouldn't* be systemic injustice, where African Americans have to have "the talk" with their sons and daughters, to prepare them for a world that will not treat them fairly. There *shouldn't* be carelessness from people like me, simply because *we* are not the ones being marginalized. There *shouldn't be* illnesses that ransack countries and the world, targeting the most vulnerable. There *shouldn't be* people who carry the name of Jesus and yet hate their neighbor. How could the kingdom of God be *now*?

Jesus told his disciples that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. "It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches" (Lk 13:18 - 19). It's something so small, that it seems negligible. It doesn't look important or showy, but *it is* here, and it *will* grow. The kingdom of God is like "a man [scattering] seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain" (Mk

4:26b – 28a). The kingdom of God grows without our efforts. We plant, but the growth is out of our hands.

In verse 6, Jesus' disciples asked for specifics. They wanted to know if Jesus was *now* going to bring the kingdom of God by restoring the kingdom to Israel. They believed that the kingdom of God would once again be a *national* kingdom. They had reason to believe that it would be a national kingdom, because that was how God worked in the past, and that was what He seemed to promise.

For many years, God had appointed kings to be vice regents, representatives of His sovereignty on earth.¹ God had promised to King David that He would establish his kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13).

The disciples *thought* that Jesus meant that the kingdom of God would be a national kingdom, but they would later understand that it is something *more*. It's *more* hidden, *more* expansive, and *more* powerful. The kingdom of God is only visible for those who have eyes to see it, and it will one day be complete. The kingdom of God is already...*and* not yet.

The kingdom of God is what *you* are invited into. You are invited to participate in the work of God in the world. Be encouraged that God *is* at work, often hidden from plain sight. The kingdom is not often obvious or glamorous. But it is here, and it is *growing*.

There are many very special people at St. Tim's. One of those people is a woman named Linda Suda. Linda is as bubbly and personable as they get, so it's likely that if you are a part of St. Tim's, you know Linda. But Linda is more than

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 32.

bubbly and personable. She is an inspiration and a pillar of faith. She *loves* the Lord, and embodies Nehemiah 8:10; the joy of the Lord is her strength! Being around her, you can't *help* but smile and feel encouraged, strengthened for another day. What you might *not* know is that Linda has a beautiful humility.

Last year, Linda told me that she had learned something new. She had watched a dramatization of the lives of the disciples, and was profoundly moved. She learned that they were *ordinary* people. Up until that point, she had believed that the disciples were somehow special, unique, different from us. But she learned that they were ordinary people, who screwed things up all the time. They constantly got things wrong. She told me that she was moved to tears, as she realized that God uses *normal people* to accomplish His purposes, to expand the kingdom of God.

It is amazing that God, in His grace, chooses *ordinary people* like the disciples and like you and me. He is not hindered by our perceived lack of competence, charisma, or gifts. He has simply chosen. He has chosen *you* to be a part of His work in the world – not because of anything in you but out of His love for you and for the world. (pause)

Jesus' disciples witnessed his life, death, resurrection, and, in Acts 1, his ascension. But their purpose was not to relish in all that they had seen and live in the past. Their purpose was to *share* what they had witnessed. In verse 8, they were told that they were to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In other words, they were to be witnesses in the heart of the Jewish faith, to those who were considered enemies, and to people they had no experience with.

The message of Jesus, and the kingdom of God was to expand to the entire *world*. *This* was their mission. But how in the *world* were they to do this? Verse 8 tells us. Jesus said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses...” They had an *incredible* mission, but they wouldn’t do it alone. They weren’t to do *any* of it, in fact, until they were immersed, baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus ascends into heaven, and a cloud hides him from their eyes. They are left, staring into the sky, when suddenly two angels appear, asking why they’re doing that. Jesus will return in the same way. It will be so obvious, that there is no reason to stand there staring. They’ve got work to do!

A dramatic start in just 11 verses. And it gets better from there! The Holy Spirit comes on them like tongues of fire, and they begin to speak different languages. Their mission begins, as pilgrims from many different countries gather around, hearing the wonders of God in their mother tongues! (Acts 2:11).

And the mission to the ends of the earth continues! We will hear more about the acts of the disciples and the acts of the Holy Spirit as we continue our journey this summer.

As we journey together, know this: Wherever you are and whatever gifts you have been given, it *is* enough. *You* are enough. Whether you are an introvert or an extrovert, eloquent or a stutterer, optimistic or pessimistic, God in Jesus Christ has chosen *you*. He has chosen you to be a witness to His work in your life. And you won’t do it alone; you *can’t* do it alone. He will empower you with the Holy Spirit to accomplish all that God has for you.

Can you imagine what that will look like, when each one of us is empowered with the Holy Spirit and witnesses to his work in our lives? Can you imagine what St. Tim's, the church at large, and the world will look like, when we allow the kingdom of God to take root in our lives? May Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven!

As a church, we pray that the Holy Spirit would flood this place, that God would be glorified. Let's sing!