



Westminster  
Presbyterian Church  
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

## Active Seeking Acts 1:1-11

We are told that following the resurrection Jesus made appearances over a period of forty days. Our text is about Jesus' final appearance when he was taken into the clouds. In commemoration of Jesus' ascension, many churches celebrate Ascension Day which is this coming Thursday. Yes, we are almost forty days out from Easter.

Hear the Word as I read the first eleven verses of the Acts of the Apostles which is the account of Jesus' final instructions to his disciples followed by his ascension:

**In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."**

**<sup>6</sup> Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"**

**<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> 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."**

**<sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.**

**<sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> "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.”**

Luke, the beloved physician, a fellow laborer with Paul, is the author of Acts and the Gospel according to Luke. Both accounts are addressed to a man named Theophilus, who we know nothing about. It could be that Theophilus was a fellow physician, a friend, maybe a teacher who had influenced Luke. It could be that Theophilus was not a person at all but the name Luke uses for the church.

The name Theophilus literally means, “Lover of God.” And Luke, rather than writing an individual, was writing the “lovers of God,” that is, the Church. I like that name, and if I were to ever be in a position to name a church, I would suggest Theophilus Presbyterian Church, for hopefully that name describes any church. We are to be the Lovers of God Church. And as the lovers of God, our mission according to Luke is to know and proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ.

In the first verse of Acts, Luke tells us that in his first book – The Gospel According to Luke – he wrote about all Jesus began to do and teach. You know that in the Gospel According to Luke we are told about Jesus’ birth, his boyhood, his ministry, including his teachings and miracles, his death, his resurrection, his appearances, and his ascension; yet according to the introduction of Acts this was only the beginning. The point is that Jesus did not stop working in the lives of his people after his ascension; Jesus had only begun to work in the life of his church. And ten days following Jesus’ ascension the Holy Spirit came into the world to empower the church to continue to do the work of Jesus. And what is the work of Jesus we are commissioned and empowered to do?

First and foremost, we are commissioned to tell about the cross and the atonement for sin that comes through Jesus’ death and resurrection. We are to tell them about God’s love.

But also ... Well, look at the text. Jesus and the disciples were eating together, and Jesus said, **“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.”** Wait for the Holy Spirit. Something was about to happen that will turn the world upside down. And the disciples asked, **“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?”**

“No, do not concern yourselves about when that will happen. It will come in God’s time, but you will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to do my work. When that power comes, you will go and share all you know about me. Begin in

Jerusalem, and then go out to all Judea, even into Samaria. Don't leave the Samaritans out as you are prone to do, and don't stop there for your work is not finished until you have reached the ends of the earth."

This morning I want to address Theophilus -- the lovers of God -- the church. And as I do, I give thanks for the opportunity to proclaim that Jesus did not stop working in the church when he was glorified at his ascension, but through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit he has only begun to work. And in reliance upon God's Spirit we will effectively proclaim the gospel, living by the teachings of Jesus, calling people to repentance and assuring them of God's grace and forgiveness.

This past week, as I considered Theophilus I wondered if we, the lovers of God, need to go back to Jerusalem and sit with the disciples seeking God's Holy Spirit to lead us to be witnesses of God's love. Maybe we should evaluate our commitment to share God's love with the world around us, or do we simply go through the motions of doing a little here and maybe a little there to ease our conscience?

Whew! I know that was a harsh statement, but please know I am preaching to myself, especially when it comes to evaluating. You see this past Tuesday I scared the daylights out of myself, by asking a question, a question which I am looking for the courage to answer. To be honest I am afraid to answer the question. The genesis of the question came from listening to a book on CD about slavery and the Civil War. I am sure you are aware that in the south almost every pastor preached about slavery being a divine institution. There were a few preachers in the North who stood against that horrid institution. But I wondered, being a southern boy, what would I have preached about slavery in a southern pulpit if I lived in 1860? And I wonder, do I have the courage to preach about God's righteousness, God's justice, God's freedom, and his grace extended to all, especially if I am in the minority and will suffer the consequences for preaching the love of Jesus for all people?

In 1860 white churches, especially in the south, wanted to hear their preachers twist Scripture in order to legitimize slavery, and they did a great job. I do not know of a single southern preacher before the Civil War who proclaimed that slavery was an absolute and total evil, that blacks and whites are equal in every way before God our creator and thereby should have equal rights. Any preacher who would say such a thing in the south in 1860 would at best lose their job and at worst be tarred and feathered. It may be one reason so many in our

country today leave the church because we have become irrelevant, our message is one that makes us comfortable with our prejudice, our notions of how culture should be defined, and of self-centeredness while there is so much suffering in the world. I need to go back to Jerusalem, and seek God's Spirit and pray for the courage to do and to preach what is right.

In the early part of the last century Dr. Samuel Moffet served as a medical missionary in Korea. When cars became popular in Korea, Dr. Moffet refused to ride in them. The people called him backward, they poked a little fun at him, but he continued to walk to his destinations. When asked why he refused to ride in a car, Dr. Moffet replied, "Cars are too fast and pass by the people in the streets. I do not ride in cars, unless it is an emergency, because they prevent me from sharing the love of Jesus Christ with the people I walk with on the way."

Dr. Moffet had a reputation of loving God and people. He shared Jesus by offering his medical skills to the Korean people. He walked with the people, he got to know them, he cared for abused women and children, and he told the people about God's love. He was a light shining in the darkness and gave up what would have been a lucrative medical practice in America to do something about the suffering in a foreign land.

I need to go back to Jerusalem and seek God's Spirit and pray for the courage to really care for people. I need to pray for the courage to be a representative of Jesus Christ in this world with integrity. And I wonder if anyone here this morning feels the need to join me in actively seeking God's will and power to help transform the world with Christ's love.

I think we need to go back to Jerusalem with the apostles and seek God's Holy Spirit, if for no other reason than to determine if we have strayed off course. Does the church concern itself more with the trite and petty, or with justice, righteousness, and especially the love of God? We have a powerful message to share, but does the message get lost somewhere between our own concerns, and standing up for our rights over and above those who are marginalized?

I think I have an answer to my question. Not the specific question as to what I may or may not have preached in 1860, but to the more general question of will my preaching, or for that matter our living together as Theophilus, the church, the lovers of God be anything close to what God has in mind.

I think, actually I know the answer is Jesus. Not the Jesus who blesses our comforts and looks the other way when we sin, but Jesus who shows and teaches us how to live.

The answer is Jesus who teaches us that he loves the whole world. He loves red, and yellow, black and white they are precious in his sight.

The answer is Jesus who teaches us to be humble, forgiving, to turn the other cheek, to love your neighbors and yes to love even your enemies.

The answer is not to show our righteousness with a pious vocabulary, but actually caring for those who are in need especially those who are shunned by society.

Lord I want to be a Christian who is freed from the fear of people who look or speak or worship differently than I do.

Lord I want to be a Christian who loves this country, but will never put loyalty to country above emulating Jesus.

Lord I want to be a Christian, who tolerates a global Church where all people are openly welcomed, fully celebrated and equally cared for.

Lord I want to be a Christian who is stingy with judgement and generous with grace.

Lord, understanding that we are all sinners in need of your grace, yet I want to be a Christian who can see the image of God in people of every color, every religious tradition and sexual orientation.

Lord I want to be a Christian who is filled with the character of Jesus, his humility, his compassion, his gentleness, his attention to the poor and the forgotten clearly expressing your love.

Lord, I want to be a Christian that does justice, loves mercy and walks humbly with you.

Lord, I want to be a Christian who knows the joy deep in my soul when I am in a right relationship with Christ.

Brothers and sisters, when was the last time you sat down and read the Sermon on the Mount? If you want to read it this afternoon, it is found in Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7. If you want to know how to life as a Christian that is the place to start.

Maybe we all need to join the disciples in Jerusalem during these days before Pentecost and pray for the Holy Spirit to do God's work in us and our church, that we will focus our commitments and resources in order to show the love of Jesus.

I pray for the day when we will be able to profoundly influence the society in which we live, that we will be lifting up the concerns of God and His will and through God's power we will work to defeat hunger, homelessness, disease, child abuse, and older adult abuse, racism, sexism, Satanism and all the other "isms." And most of all proclaim the one who died on a cross for the sin of the whole world and offers us the eternal presence of Christ in the Kingdom of God.

**When Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples looked up and watched him disappear into the clouds. And as they were looking two men dressed in white stood beside them and said, "Men of Galilee, 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." I think what that means is, it's time to get to work. Amen.**