



St. Paul Lutheran Church

“Your Refuge from the Storm”

# LifeGroup

April 7, 2024  
Acts 1:1-11

## Community

### SERIES OVERVIEW

In Acts, Luke continues the riveting story of mystery and wonder, danger and adventure, purpose and vision, as God’s message of redemption and salvation spreads. From the first chapters, where we witness the bold beginnings of the church, all the way through the final moments of Paul’s life, we see ordinary people doing extraordinary things by the Spirit’s power as the growing community of faith extends from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

### TODAY’S THEME

Luke continues his story with a summary of the mission and ministry of Jesus from his transfiguration on Mount Tabor to his ascension on the Mount of Olives. Referencing the Holy Spirit three times in this brief passage, Luke grounds the story of the birth of the church in the wisdom that bold, new beginnings are Spirit-driven.

### WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO KNOW?

We want our small group to know that every Christian has been commissioned and empowered to be a witness.

### WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO DO?

We want small group members to discover what mission they are commissioned and empowered for, and then step into that mission.

### INTRODUCTION

We are all witnesses in daily life. We eat at a great restaurant and can’t wait to tell a friend. We see a good movie or book and don’t hesitate to recommend it to others. But when it comes to our faith, fear takes over and convinces us that we don’t know enough, that we really don’t have anything to share, or that we’ll be rejected. Or we’ve experienced such poor examples of “witnessing” that we want nothing to do with it.

### ICEBREAKER

What picture comes to mind when you hear the word witness? Who was the most significant influence in your faith journey? Why? What was it about their witness that helped you connect with Jesus?

### PRAY TOGETHER

God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, work through us to be your witnesses, bearing your message to the ends of the earth. You have charged us with the responsibility of carrying out your mission in the world, and you equip each of us for our unique part in ministry. Help us tell the story of what you have done and what you are doing in our lives. Amen.

## Content

“The Acts of the Apostles” is the companion volume to Luke’s Gospel, recording the spread of the gospel throughout the ancient world. Luke’s Gospel ends with the Emmaus Road story, along with numerous appearances of the resurrected Christ to his followers, concluding with a brief recounting of the ascension:

“Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

There is some minor overlapping between the end of the Gospel and the beginning of Luke’s second book. Acts, however, expands on both the instructions that Jesus left with his disciples as well as the details of the ascension itself.

The Holy Spirit plays a prominent role in Luke’s narrative and theology, and it’s mentioned three times in this passage alone. The first mention, in verse 2, is a bit confusing. What does it mean that, in the 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension, Jesus taught the disciples “through the Holy Spirit”? Perhaps these words mean that now, after the resurrection, the Holy Spirit opens the eyes, hearts, and minds of the disciples to more fully and clearly understand what they struggled to grasp in Luke’s Gospel.

And what instructions does Jesus give to the disciples in these days? Luke tells us at least this much:

1. He teaches them about the kingdom of God (3).
2. He orders them to stay in Jerusalem to wait for their baptism with the Holy Spirit (4-5).
3. He lets them know that their power for ministry and witness will come through the Holy Spirit (8).

*(Read Acts 1:1-11.)* The disciples’ question in verse 6 lets us know that, despite the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the disciples still did not fully understand Jesus’ meaning and mission. The average Jew in Jesus’ day was looking forward with great anticipation to the literal coming of the Messiah’s earthly kingdom, and with it the restoration of the fortunes and military might that the nation had enjoyed under King David. Jesus had certainly taught a great deal about his coming kingdom in his ministry with the disciples. During this 40-day instruction period, the disciples probably had questions about the promised kingdom. Their anticipation had been heightened with their Master’s resurrection from the dead. Fully expecting Jesus to bring in his kingdom on earth at that moment, the disciples asked, “Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

**DISCUSSION** What do you think the disciples expect Jesus to do? This Christ who was dead is now alive and talking to them. What do you think this feels like for the disciples?

Jesus’ answer, disappointing to the disciples, is a rebuke and a gentle reminder that the apostles’ role (like the role he had modeled

on earth) is to desire to be in God's presence in prayer and worship, and to faithfully follow God's sovereign lead. The times (*chronos*) and seasons (*kairos*) are under God's power (*exousia*); the Holy Spirit will provide the power (*dynamus*) that the disciples need to be Jesus' witnesses locally, nationally and to the ends of the earth.

**DISCUSSION** So Jesus tosses the baton to the disciples! What would your reaction be? How do we faithfully follow God's sovereign lead in our everyday life? You've got the "dynamus." What do you think that means?

As the final words of Jesus, recorded by Luke, before the ascension, verses 7-8 are critical. We shouldn't miss the implications. Our task is to witness to what we've seen and experienced. Our power is the Holy Spirit, not our own. Our mission field is around the block and around the world. This work isn't given to some, but to all.

Jesus is lifted up, and a cloud takes him out of their sight. This cloud symbolizes the glory of God. In the Old Testament, we read that a cloud led the Israelites through the wilderness, and that God made his presence known to the people by appearing in a cloud. A cloud also enveloped Jesus and three of his disciples at the transfiguration as a visible symbol of God's presence. So when Jesus returns to glory, he returns in a cloud that takes him "out of their sight."

The disciples need to see Jesus make this transition. The ascension confirms for them that Jesus truly is God. In addition, they witness the fact that he has physically left earth and returned to his heavenly home. The remaining work must be done by the witnesses he leaves behind, operating in the power of the promised Holy Spirit.

**DISCUSSION** What does the ascension of Jesus mean for us today? Under the heading of "spiritual experiences," this would be right up there. Put yourself in the sandals of these disciples and talk about what you would be feeling right now.

Just as angels announced the birth of God's Son, two angels also announce that Jesus has returned to heaven, and will one day return to earth in the same way. Some read a mild rebuke in the angels' words ("quit staring into space and get to work!") while others merely hear in these words a statement of fact regarding Jesus' return. The stage is now set for Pentecost, the birth of the church and the launching of its Spirit-powered mission.

### GOING DEEPER: THE APOSTLES' CREED CONNECTION

We don't talk a lot about the ascension, but it holds a major place in the history of the Christian church. In the early church, the Feast of the Ascension was a much bigger deal than the celebration of Christmas. Some ancient historians suggest that the Feast of the Ascension dates back to as early as 68 AD, while the church didn't begin celebrating Christmas until around 400 AD. It's also a part of our credal confession: "He was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven." This ascension is important stuff!

Jesus' ascension is like a victory lap after the cross. As promised, Jesus ascends in glory, bestowed by God for his humility and obedience. He is seated in heaven at the "right hand" of God, the place of honor and authority. There is also a strain of theology

that says that in his ascension Jesus defeated rulers and authorities (Colossians 2:15, Ephesians 4:7).

So what? While we tend to make very little of Jesus' ascension, there are actually many things implied in this phrase that have relevance for our faith lives. Here are just a few:

- Jesus' spiritual rule from heaven can begin globally.
- The ministry of the Holy Spirit is now active in our lives.
- We, too, are seated with Christ (Ephesians 2:6).
- We have a high priest who intercedes for us.
- Jesus is preparing a place for us (John 14).
- Jesus has officially handed off the ministry of reconciliation to his disciples.

### DISCUSSION

What does the ascension mean for us, and for the unique mission that God has given to each one of us?

## Application

Share a spiritual experience. Learn from each other how to tell your story, and how everyone's story is valid and transforming. Talk about ways to witness to your faith that would be authentic and real for you. This week, commit to sharing your story with one more believer. Next week report on how your witnessing was received.

### PRAY TOGETHER

God, you have called us to be your witnesses in your mission for the world. We know that, on our own, we cannot respond to your call or be equipped for ministry. We pray that your Holy Spirit will give us the power to accomplish the mission that you have for us. We pray that you will allow us to witness wherever we live, work or play. Go with us into the coming week as we seek to be your faithful disciples in Jesus' name. Amen.

### ADDITIONAL CONVERSATION AND REFLECTION

## *Growing Faith*

### ACTS 2:42-47

The first generation of Christians lived intentionally. They lived in ways that helped them to grow, and grow together. Notice what Luke highlights about how the early Christians lived: They constantly learned from the Apostles' teaching. They spent time in fellowship with one another. They worshiped together. They prayed together. They made their resources available for the needs of others. They lived with a deep sense of gratitude. They praised God for all good things. They earned the respect of their neighbors. And notice the results: the church grew! Consider your life through the lens of the early Christians. Where are you doing well? How might you need to change?

**Acts 1:1-11 NLT** In my first book I told you, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began to do and teach (2) until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions through the Holy Spirit. (3) During the forty days after he suffered and died, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. And he talked to them about the Kingdom of God. (4) Once when he was eating with them, he commanded them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. (5) John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (6) So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, “Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?” (7) He replied, “The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. (8) But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (9) After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. (10) As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. (11) “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!”