

Every year during the Easter season, we have readings from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. But this year, in our parish reading project, we've read through Luke together during the season of Lent. And this past week, we've started reading through Acts during the first 40 days of the Easter season.

Luke and Acts are a two-volume work. Luke first tells the story of Jesus in his Gospel. And then in Acts, Luke tells the story of Jesus' apostles beginning to take Jesus' message out into the world.

People are often confused by the terms disciple and apostle. They are simply different stages for the same people.

The word disciple shares the same English root as the word discipline. Disciples sit under the discipline of a teacher and learn about a particular discipline from that teacher.

The word apostle shares the same English root as postal or epistle, which is another word for letter. A letter is some sort of writing sent to convey a message. An apostle is a human letter if you will, someone sent out to convey a message.

So the book of the Acts of the Apostles is about the actions of those sent out by Jesus to carry his message.

Where is the message being sent? Jesus is very clear. At the beginning of Acts, just before Jesus ascends into heaven, he tells his followers to remain in Jerusalem. Then he says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jerusalem. Then Judea and Samaria. Then to the ends of the earth. It's like an archery target with expanding circles, or ripples expanding outward in a pond. The gift of the Holy Spirit will be given to the Apostles in Jerusalem. And the early church will grow in Jerusalem. Then they will take it the good news out to surrounding regions, Judea, then Samaria. But eventually they will go to the ends of the earth.

Today, you can look at a globe and can see that the opposite side of the world from Jerusalem is the Hawaiian Islands and Polynesia. And sure enough, Christianity has expanded that far.

But Luke didn't know about Hawaii. For Luke, the ends of the earth involved the boundaries of the known world, the world of the Roman Empire.

So, the main theme of Acts is that through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus sends his apostles forth to carry his message to the world, beginning from Jerusalem.

And that mention of the Holy Spirit is not accidental. The Holy Spirit is a major part of the Acts of the Apostles.

The Holy Spirit is mentioned 17 times in the Gospel of Luke. And the Spirit is mentioned 59 times in Acts. So many times, that one nickname for the book of Acts is, "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit."

Our lesson from Acts today will actually be part of our Parish Reading Project reading for tomorrow. But though it is short, it actually gives us a good lens through which to view the entire first section of Acts.

In our lesson today, the apostles have been arrested and are being tried. Previously, Peter and John had been arrested and brought before the council in chapter 4. They were told to stop teaching and preaching publicly, and then they were released.

But now in chapter 5, it's a larger group of apostles that have been detained. They have been detained and imprisoned for again preaching and teaching in the temple. Plus they have been healing many who were sick.

And in the section right before our lesson, they had been mysteriously released from jail by an angel during the night. And humorously, when the council sends guards to summon the apostles from jail, they find them missing, and eventually locate them right back in the temple again engaged in teaching and preaching. So they arrest this group a second time and haul them in.

Which is where our lesson picks up today. The high priest says to the apostles, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching."¹

But Peter responds with a short speech:

"We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."²

It's a short speech but it's loaded with meaning.

First of all, Peter is talking about the identity of God. He calls him the "God of our ancestors." In other words, the early Christians are not considering themselves as something different from Judaism. They see themselves as being in continuity with Judaism. It is the God of OUR ancestors.

But God has done something new. God has raised Jesus from the dead. And God has exalted him to be the savior of Israel and to bring forgiveness of sins.

¹ Acts 5:28

² Acts 5:29-32

This is central to the apostle's proclamation. God has raised Jesus from the dead. The good news of the resurrection of Jesus is central to the message of the early Christians.

And, what's more, the apostles are witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. They have seen him and interacted with him after his resurrection. And he has sent them to share this good news with everyone, beginning in Jerusalem.

AND, the person of the Holy Spirit, the continuing presence of God and Jesus, is also a witness to the Resurrection.

So this little speech may be short. But it is powerful. And it encapsulates the thrust of the early part of the Book of Acts.

We see continuity with what has happened before. And it's actually a double continuity.

The apostles are still following the God of Israel. So they are in continuity with their Jewish past.

AND, they are in continuity with their Lord, with Jesus.

Jesus taught. Jesus preached. Jesus healed.

And now the apostles are doing these same things. They are teaching, preaching, and healing. They are carrying Jesus' mission forward as his continuing body, his continuing presence in the world.

And they aren't doing this out of their own strength. Instead, they are being empowered for this work by the Holy Spirit.

Plus, they are starting to share in other things with Jesus.

Jesus had been arrested and tried. Now they also are being arrested and tried. Jesus was executed. And in the coming chapters of Acts, we will see some of the apostles suffering this same fate.

They are not only following their Lord in doing what he did as far as their proclamation and teaching and healing are concerned. They are also beginning to follow him in his suffering, and eventually, in being sharing in his death in a very literal way.

So in this section of Acts we see one of the major themes of Acts. Jesus leaves his apostles behind to carry on his work and ministry, to do the things that he did. And we see the apostles doing exactly that.

But, there's one more thing that's not in continuity with the apostle's Jewish past. And it's not something that Jesus did much of. But it's a key part of the proclamation of the apostles.

What is this new thing, this new emphasis of these apostles? It is to proclaim Jesus' resurrection.

When Jesus was running around teaching, his main focus was on the nature of the kingdom of God. He made a few predictions about his resurrection. And after his resurrection he instructed the apostles to go forth and share that good news. But it only made up a small percentage of Jesus' total proclamation himself.

But when the apostles do go out, the resurrection becomes one of their major messages. It was so groundbreaking, so earth shaking that the apostles just can't seem to stop talking about it.

Yes, these apostles go forth sharing Jesus' teachings. They pass them along and hand them down to others.

But they also devote a large percentage of their own preaching and teaching to sharing the amazing news that God has raised Jesus Christ from death. And that through the risen Christ, God offers forgiveness and new life to all.

This is something they're so excited about they just can't stop sharing it. Arrest won't dissuade them. Being put on trial won't stop them. Even being put to death doesn't stop the message. The apostles are willing to give their lives rather than to deny the truth of the resurrection. And their bravery inspires new generations of followers to pick up the baton, to carry the message forward, to continue to proclaim the truth of the love of God made known through the teaching and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And we are their heirs. We have received the message from those who came before us. And we are called to share it and to pass it along to others.

Jesus has called us to be his church, to be his body in the world. In the May newsletter, I quote from St. Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic. She writes,

*Christ has no body on earth now but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks
with compassion on the world.
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

As St. Teresa reminds us, we are Christ's people, his body. As Acts reminds us, we are called to do what he does, to love others in his name. And we are called to be witnesses to his resurrection and the new life he offers. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.