

Today is Ascension Sunday, when we hear how Jesus - 40 days after his resurrection - was taken up into heaven right in front of his disciples who craned their necks until he was out of sight. Not many folks really know much about the Ascension. In fact, for years, even as a pastor, my interest in this Sunday was basically the fact that it was the last week of the Easter season and the Sunday just before Pentecost.

It's good to note, though, that Gospel-writer Luke thought it important enough that he ended the Gospel of Luke with the story of Jesus' Ascension and then repeated the same story in his next account, the Book of Acts. He wanted to make sure we didn't miss it, which is why we heard both today.

So what are we not to miss? One thing is that in spite of the fact that Jesus had just been taken away from them, the disciples went to Jerusalem with great joy. No tears or sobbing... No complaints that he had told them to go to the city of Jerusalem instead of letting them go home.... Jesus had told them that God had work for them to do, that promises would be fulfilled through them, that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached to all nations, and that they had to go to Jerusalem and wait "to be clothed in power." And so they did. Next week we will celebrate Pentecost, the event that gave them power to be effective witnesses to God's work in this world.

What does all this have to do with our lives right now? If we are followers of Jesus, we are promised that God has work for us to do also, and that we, too, can be "clothed with power" to be Christ's effective witnesses in our world.

Power. One New Year's Day, in the Tournament of Roses parade, one of the beautiful floats suddenly sputtered and quit. The truck pulling it was out of gas. The whole parade was stalled until someone could get some fuel. The funny thing was that this particular float represented the then very powerful Standard Oil Company. With its vast resources, its truck was out of gas. The float symbolizing power had no power to move. (pause)

We are a society addicted to the idea of power. Our technologies - cell phones, computers - make us feel powerful, until something goes wrong, or until somebody steals our personal information from them. The development of new drugs that seem to have power over diseases, such as cancer-fighting drugs; new antibiotics to counteract drug-resistant bacteria; drugs to lower our cholesterol or manage our diabetes, give us hope that we can better control our health... Power sways and scares us. Guns and knives reveal sad struggles for power. And money - How many folks buy Powerball tickets, hoping for luck that will give them power in their lives?

We love power, and seek power, and need power, but we tend to look for it in all the wrong places. God offers us real power, power that cannot be defeated even by death, the power that

comes to us through our relationship with our Lord.

An old preacher rocked in his chair one afternoon years ago and told how his life had taught him one big thing: to trust God. "In my life I had times when I really didn't think I could make it, but in every twist - especially as I look back now - God was there. It's been a good ride; I would not change a thing. God is trustworthy." You can trust God.

When we face difficulties and troubles in our lives, when life deals us a "bum hand" or the future looks dismal or uncertain, we are invited to hold on to Jesus' promise. We can receive power to witness to the love, forgiveness and hope of Jesus Christ.

Several years ago I was told that it is a common practice in Kenya for Christians wanting to witness to Jesus to seek out persons in a village who have very basic needs, such as the thatching of a roof. The church then mobilizes all its resources to provide a new roof, to share from the available supply of food, or to bring medical care if there is someone sick within the household. When asked *why* such generosity is rendered, the workers then share the story of Jesus Christ - crucified and risen. No cramming of a message down somebody's throat, just loving action in Jesus' name. *My Lord Jesus is the reason I am doing this good thing for you.* That's power.

Rebecca Manley Pippert, in her book, *Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World*, tells the story about a brilliant college student named Bill who became a Christian. Bill was different. He never wore shoes, no matter what the weather, and no matter where he went, he dressed in a tee-shirt and jeans. In fact, even when he visited the campus church he was always dressed that way, in a t-shirt and jeans and, of course, without shoes. Keep in mind that this happened in days when churches tended to be stuffy about the appropriate attire for worship. One Sunday during the summer, Bill decided to visit a local church near the campus. He came a little late and since the church was full (this WAS a long time ago!), Bill walked down the aisle looking for a seat. Because of his less-than-normal attire, not one person in the congregation would move over to give him a seat. So, not finding a seat, Bill sat down on the floor on the carpet in front of the front pew. You can imagine the tension in the congregation with that young man dressed in blue jeans and a t-shirt and not wearing shoes, sitting on the carpet in front of them.

Just when things seemed unbearable, an elderly man in the congregation got up from his seat and began walking up the aisle toward Bill. People looked at each other. They were sure they knew what was about to happen. This gentleman would ask the young fellow to get up and leave. But when the older fellow got to where Bill was sitting, he stopped, and, to everyone's surprise, slowly lowered himself to the floor, and the two of them sat there and worshiped together. At first people were shocked, but as they thought about it they were moved. For they had seen an example of the kind of love and acceptance they were called to offer one another in the Church. This older man risked himself to witness to the love and presence of Jesus. (Found in *Taking The Risk Out Of Dying*, Lee Griess, edited by FTE)

In the gospel of Luke, we heard Jesus tell his followers: "You are my witnesses... Wait in Jerusalem until you are clothed in power."

What about us? Are we waiting to be clothed in the power of the Holy Spirit as God sends it

upon us to make us effective witnesses in this world? Are we even willing to *be* such witnesses?

Throughout the Bible and especially in the New Testament, God is shown as consistently reaching out to the “wrong” people, persons excluded by the mainstream religious folks of the day. Each of us and all of us would be wise to ask God to whom we are to witness today....

Our Lord Jesus asks us to share hope in a world that often looks and feels hopeless. Our actions and love are to offer the life of Christ even as we stand by the bedside of one who is dying. We are to share the power of forgiveness even when someone has done something unforgivable. We can do this, frail and totally human as we are, only because Jesus Christ fills us with the power to do so, and sends us forward into an uncertain world with the certainty of his presence, his power, and his peace.

Wait for him to clothe you with power. Ask him to. Put yourself, as best you can, at HIS disposal, and you will discover that God can and will act in your life today. That’s the mystery of the Gospel, and it’s absolutely what we are invited by God to experience. By the grace of God, may each of us become joyful witnesses to the power of God’s Holy Spirit. Amen.