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Acts 1:6-14

HOLY WITNESSES

The writer of the Book of Acts gives us a very dramatic exit to Jesus' life here on earth. It's really a Hollywood kind of ending. Jesus has been spending some time with the disciples after his resurrection but now the time has come for him to finally depart and go to heaven. The disciples are all gathered around him when Jesus is lifted up like a rocket and rises into the sky until he vanishes from sight. It's a very grand exit.

But as dramatic as this scene is, I'm not convinced that this image of Jesus shooting up into the sky is where our attention is supposed to be focused. In fact, even as the disciples stand there with their necks craned looking upward, mouths open in astonishment, even as they stand there looking up where Jesus has just disappeared, two angelic looking figures redirect their attention back to earth. These angelic figures ask the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" In other words, get on with things.

But what are these disciples now supposed to be doing? And by extension, what are we his modern-day disciples now supposed to be doing? This holy man Jesus entered the disciples' lives--he taught, healed, loved, forgave, fed, comforted, offered hope, and then was arrested, crucified, buried, and resurrected. And then this extraordinary holy man exits this world in this spectacular lift-off. But the world he leaves behind, this world his disciples live in, this world you and I live in, is still a very broken and imperfect world. A world of violence. A world of greed. A world of heartbreak. A world of despair and poverty and suffering. A world of injustice and hatred. A world of pandemics. A world of death. It's a world that can feel very

overwhelming and very frightening. And we can feel very inadequate, even powerless, in the face of this world's realities.

But we are not as powerless as we sometimes think. Immediately before Jesus ascends to heaven he tells his followers something important. He tells them that after he leaves they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. And with this power, with this power Jesus' followers will be empowered to be his witnesses.

It may seem as if Jesus left us with a holy mess, but he really left his followers with a holy mission. He left us with a holy purpose. We are empowered in our lives to witness to the way of Jesus. We are called to witness to the world everything we know and have learned and have experienced about Jesus. This means that our lives are meant to be places where Jesus' love, grace, compassion, justice, generosity are displayed for all to see. And by that, I do not mean ordinary love, grace, compassion, generosity. Ordinary love is, "I'll love you as long as you love me or if I get something out of it." Ordinary compassion extends kindness and care only to those who don't make big mistakes. Ordinary generosity is calculated and measured. Ordinary forgiveness is limited to small infractions and only for a limited number of infractions. But Jesus demonstrated radical love, radical generosity, radical compassion, radical forgiveness. And he then turns to us and says, "be my witnesses."

The Church is not a memorial society for a holy man who lived thousands of years ago. Instead, it is a community that is called to witness to the living Christ and to the holy way that Christ taught us. Holiness is not found in sanctuaries. Holiness is found when we love with Christ's radical love, when we serve with Christ's radical compassion, when we share with Christ's radical generosity, when we forgive, when we voice our objections to injustice and stand with the vulnerable. The Church is not just a bunch of people that meet in a building once a

week. This pandemic has really brought that into focus. As those who have been kicked out of our own sanctuaries by this virus, we Christians are discovering new ways to witness to Christ.

Do you know what happens when we become Jesus' witnesses? Witnessing to Jesus not only helps others, it transforms us. When we witness to Jesus, holiness seeps into our veins, our cells, our DNA. By "holiness" I don't mean "self-righteousness." Holiness is different than self-righteousness. Holiness is that which is filled with the presence of God. Jesus gives us the gift of being filled with God's holy presence. That's an incredible thing we are privileged to experience in this life. Despite whatever we may face in life, whatever pain, hardship, or struggle we may experience, our lives are filled with holiness whenever we witness to the way of Jesus.

However ordinary you think of yourself and your life, you are holy when you witness to the way of Jesus Christ. However ordinary you consider your daily activities, they are made holy when you live out the way of Jesus Christ.

Jesus says to us today, to us living in the midst of a pandemic, to us who are his followers, his Church: "You are my witnesses in Buffalo, in Amherst, in Tonawanda, in Williamsville, in the United States and to the ends of the earth. Wherever you are, whatever you face in life, you are my witnesses." And just like that, your life and my life are transformed and made holy.