

**“A Study in Acts: Not for You to Know”**

**Acts 1: 1-11**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

**May 24, 2020 (Memorial Day Weekend)**

Today we continue the “Study in Acts”, leading to next Sunday’s observance of Pentecost, when we will wear red! But allow me to preface the sermon with brief comments on two other subjects.

First, virtual worship during the pandemic:

We all look forward to again gathering physically in the sanctuary. This week, national leadership has been encouraging congregations across America to do so, disregarding the current advice of most health experts. As a pastor I have received cautionary recommendations from the leadership of both the Christian Church and the United Church of Christ in our area. That advice is that congregations meeting virtually should continue to do so until at least mid-June, because social distancing and wearing masks are proven to be effective in controlling the virus. As difficult as it is for us not to be together, I believe we would best guarantee the health of each one of us if we continue virtual worship through June 14 at least. Of course, I would accede to the collective wisdom of our congregation’s leadership, and to the ongoing advice of health professionals.

Second, recognition of the meaning and purpose of the Memorial Day holiday:

I have vivid childhood memories of inspiring, red-white-and-blue village parades, street curbs lined with flag-waving young and old as uniformed veterans passed by. On occasion, as a town pastor, I addressed a grateful, solemn crowd in the central park. I have officiated funerals in which the meticulously folded Old Glory was ceremoniously handed to the grieving widow, and I have witnessed services at Arlington National Cemetery’s columbarium. On the Normandy coast, overlooking now quiet

Omaha Beach, I have walked among the orderly graves of Americans who paid the ultimate price for my freedom. At a wall on the National Mall, I have frequently run my fingers over the engraved names of friends who died in the far-off land where my son was born. So, while you and I enjoy a civic holiday tomorrow, let us pause a moment to give thanks to God for privileged earthly citizenship, for the sacrifice of men and women who have made it possible, and for those who continue to do so.

For Jesus advocates like us, a “Study in Acts” rests upon a number of basic truths. If Acts had not been handed down to us, we would have almost no knowledge about the Early Church. Acts was composed by or attributed to Luke, one of the original twelve, and later a loyal, firsthand companion of Paul. Luke is the only Gentile author in the New Testament. He addressed both his Gospel and Acts to a man named Theophilus, a title which in Greek means “God lover”. Theophilus may have been an actual government official whom Luke hoped to influence favorably toward the growing Christian community, or Theophilus may have been a fictitious name that Luke used for a devotee who needed protection. Luke’s purpose in writing Acts was threefold: 1) to defend and commend Christianity to the Roman government; 2) to demonstrate that Christianity applied to all people in all nations; and 3) to provide the historical record of Christianity’s expansion from Palestine to Rome. All of these are basic truths that underly today’s closer examination of the verses that introduce the Book of Acts.

We have all had the experience of putting a jigsaw puzzle together from multiple pieces spread out on the dining room table. Think of the Christian story--the story of Jesus’s lineage, birth, baptism, ministry, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection—as a jigsaw puzzle of hundreds of pieces, each one representing one of the varied, familiar biblical accounts. Luke inspires this imagery in verses one and two of his introduction, when he says to Theophilus: *“In my first book I wrote about all the things that Jesus did and taught from the time he began his work until the day he was taken up to heaven.”* Through faithful perseverance, the panoramic mosaic gradually evolves before our eyes on the table, as

the puzzle nears completion. Only three pieces are left aside, waiting to be positioned into the remaining space.

The last three pieces of the puzzle are identified in the early verses of the first chapter of the Book of Acts.

The clue for one piece is in verses six to eight. This piece clears up any misconception about the Kingdom of God.

Jesus meant one thing by the kingdom, while his disciples meant another. Jews thought of themselves as the chosen people, destined for dominion over the whole world, even though they had been dominated in turn by the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. They expected that God would ultimately confer superiority upon them. They imagined the kingdom in political terms.

Jesus meant something entirely different. The kingdom that Jesus imagined was a fellowship on earth that would embody the Will of God as completely and perfectly as if it were Heaven itself—a kingdom built not on power but on love. That idea is in the very prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to use. Luke reports that the disciples, still stuck in the political mode, anxiously asked Jesus when it would become Israel's turn. Jesus countered in the social mode: *"The times and occasions are set by (God's) authority, and it is not for you to know."* Just be patient, and be ready. The Holy Spirit will tell you when, and furthermore, the Holy Spirit will fill you with the power to witness well beyond Jerusalem, to the ends of the earth.

Now there are two ways to witness to Jesus, for which I am personally grateful. One way is to witness with words, and one way is to witness by deeds. Outside of the Church, I do not very often witness to Jesus with words. I do not want to make assumptions about people, or insult them, or make them uncomfortable. I inwardly embrace my faith better than I outwardly trumpet it like the evangelicals with bullhorns near the gate at the ballpark. So witnessing to Jesus the other way—by

deeds—gets me off the hook. I believe witnessing by deeds may be more effective anyway. I was thanked by two people recently for doing that. Do you witness to Jesus by word or deed?

Luke reminds us of that remaining piece of the puzzle: Just faithfully witness to Jesus, and don't worry about when exactly Earth will resemble Heaven.

Place that piece in the puzzle! See how well it fits?

The clue for a second remaining piece is in verses nine to eleven. This piece clears up the relationship between Jesus's Ascension and Jesus's Second Coming.

Regarding Jesus's Ascension to Heaven, Luke had described it previously in his Gospel, and he was the only Gospel writer to do so. The Ascension is necessary because there had to be a definitive conclusion to the forty days of Jesus's resurrection appearances to the disciples. It was answerable proof that Jesus returned to the glory from which he came, and that's why the disciples could regroup in Jerusalem with "great joy", as Luke's Gospel records. Jesus left them with hope!

Regarding Jesus's Second Coming, which would naturally be anticipated after the Ascension, it is folly to be curious about it, and unproductive to speculate about it. God has a plan. History is not a series of events that are going nowhere. Creation is moving toward a consummation that is not ours to predict or probably even to experience. It is at that moment in time that Jesus Christ will be revealed again as Creation's Judge.

Place that piece in the puzzle! See how well it fits?

The third piece, waiting to be positioned in the remaining space of the puzzle?

It's the climactic piece. It will complete Luke's mosaic of the Christian story.

It is you. It is me. Place it in the puzzle! See how well it fits!

