

**St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
Easter 2018**

Be a Part of the Story

Our Act II Begins – We are Commissioned

Convinced – Wait – Witness – Now

First Person Narrative

I was born in Antioch in what is now Turkey during the first century. I became a doctor, a highly respected person in my community. I found helping others with their aches and pains to be rewarding and it provided me with a comfortable lifestyle.

But that all changed!

I met one of Jesus' followers named Paul. Jesus had spoken to Paul and commissioned him to spread the news that would do more than heal people's bodies. This good news would heal their souls.

I was intrigued! I left my comfortable practice to follow Paul. We walked hundreds of miles together. We sailed the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. All the while Paul told me about what Jesus had done and taught.

Our travels eventually took us back to Jerusalem. Jesus' death and resurrection had happened here 30 years earlier. Many of the apostles and eyewitnesses were still in the city and surrounding areas. I had a chance to interview them and compare their stories. I was more convinced than ever that Jesus had come back from the grave.

About this time, I wrote my first book called "The Gospel according to Luke." A man named Theophilus was struggling to believe all that he had heard about Jesus. I shared with him what I learned from my research. As I was writing, I realized it was not just my words being written on that parchment. I was an instrument of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was recording these events not just for Theophilus but for generations yet to be born.

Since I wrote that first book, Theophilus and I have become good friends. Now I'm in Rome where Paul is in prison. It looks like the Church's story is about to end.

That is what people thought when Jesus died too. End of the story! But it was really just the end of Act I of Jesus' story. Act II began on Easter.

So too, as Paul's ministry comes to an end, it is not the end of the Church's story. It is just the end of Act I. My friend Theophilus, and now you who hear my words, are to become the main characters in Act II.

So listen as I tell you the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of the Apostles and know that same Holy Spirit is at work in you. You are a main character in Act II of the church's story. Let's begin with your commissioning.

Acts 1:1-11

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

The Message

The apostles thought the story was ending the day that Jesus' ascended. "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus had accomplished his purpose. He came to give his life as a ransom for many. Now the end of the world celebration must be about to begin. "Lord, now is the time for 'The End' to appear on the screen and the credits start to roll."

But it wasn't the end of the story. It was just the end of Act I. There would be a ten-day intermission while the apostles waited for the Holy Spirit, and then Act II of the Church's story would begin on Pentecost.

There is still work to be done, so Jesus commissions them. “You shall be my witnesses. I am calling you to be the main characters of Act II.”

But Act II didn’t end with the lives of the apostles. It continues to his day. Jesus is now calling us to be the main characters in Act II of the Church’s story.

In spirit let’s kneel before the altar like a missionary on the day of his or her commissioning. We’ll be able to remember this eventful day with just four words.

Convinced – Wait – Witness – Now

Have you ever received a gift you never used? Recently one of our sisters in Christ gave Joni and me the gift of two passes to the Milwaukee Art Museum. In the middle of March we found the perfect day for us to get away and enjoy this gift. We got all dressed up. Then discovered that the passes had expired two weeks earlier! I was embarrassed to have to tell my dear friend that we did not use her gift.

On the day of your commissioning, you received a gift too. My question is: Have you made time to use that gift?

1. Convinced

The gift? “He gave many convincing proofs that he was alive” (Acts 1:3). The apostles recorded many of those convincing proofs that Jesus was alive. Those words of the apostles form Jesus’ gift to us. The question on my mind... are we using that gift?

I recall years ago how a missionary in Japan made the comment that it was not unusual for a Japanese Christian to have read the entire Bible before she or he agreed to be baptized. Committing to be a Christian was such a momentous event that they need to be absolutely certain that Jesus was the Savior. That’s why they read every one of his words in his Book.

We may think it is easy for us to be a Christian here, so I don’t need that much convincing. But how do you know what you are going to face? Some of you in high school and college are going to be challenged spiritually in your school. Is the elementary teaching you received in confirmation class enough to prepare you for high school teachers and college professors who challenge your faith?

I spoke with a dear sister in Christ this past week who shared with me the loss of her family, her health, her independence, and all her dreams for the future. Sitting in front of me was a modern-day Job. (See the Book of Job, chapters 1 and 2.) Is Jesus’ alive? Is Jesus her Savior? Has God forgiven her sins? Does God love her?

You and I don't know what challenges will come that the devil will use to make us question our faith. But Jesus does! That's why he wants to give us a gift of "many convincing proofs that he is alive."

So let's make a commitment together right now. Let's make a commitment to use this gift by reading or listening to God's word every day. In the "My Next Steps" I suggest using the YouVersion Bible app. Would you join me in this commitment?

I will use this gift at _____ (Name the time right now.)

at _____ (Write in the place... at work, your favorite rocking chair?)

beginning in _____ (Choose a book, perhaps the book of Luke and then Acts.)

on _____ (Set a date. Put it on your calendar. Today? Tomorrow? When?)

By the way, you know how my dear sister in Christ reacted when I told her we had wasted her gift to us? She smiled, told me it was ok, and the next time I saw her she gave me two more passes.

She is my vision of Jesus as we come to him and admit we have failed to use his gift of "convincing proofs" in his Word. He doesn't cast us away. Instead, in his grace, he smiles at us, forgives us, and gives us a new "today" to begin to use and love his gift of "many convincing proofs."

2. Wait

You would think that once the disciples were convinced that Jesus was alive, he would immediately send them out to be his witnesses. But oddly enough he said, "Wait!"

⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Wait? Why? He explained that he wanted to pour out the Holy Spirit upon them. But he didn't tell them why that didn't happen right now. He didn't tell them when. He told them, "Wait!"

So often God in his wisdom doesn't make his plan clear to us immediately. As we read this book of Acts, you will see that again and again. In Acts 8, the Holy Spirit is blessing Philip's ministry in Samaria, and he tells him, "Go out into the middle of the desert." If I had been Philip, I would have said, "But God, here is the place for me to be." But the Spirit was clear. Go out into the middle of nowhere and wait. I'll use you as I know how.

Later, the Apostle Paul spent two years in prison in Caesarea and another two years of prison in Rome. This makes no sense what so ever! The Church needed Paul's skills out on the road. But the Spirit said, "Wait." And so Paul waited in prison, ready to be used when and how the Spirit desired.

So too, there are many times when God's plan for us won't be clear. Perhaps we have a person in mind that we really would love to talk with about our Savior. But the time never seems to be right. Or we wonder where God wants us to live and work. Where does he want us to carry out our commission to witness? The answer doesn't seem to be coming. God has a plan. Trust that he can make that plan clear to us. So we wait.

As we wait, let's pray. Later in this chapter Luke wrote about the early church: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14).

We join the early church in prayer: "Lead us, Lord, to the place and to the time you want us to be your witnesses."

3. Witness

As we wait for God to make his plan clear to us, let's pray about the promise in our commissioning: "You shall be my witnesses."

Remember what a witness does. A witness is to tell what you know. In the GroupWork for this week, we suggest an exercise that can help you in your witness.

Witness: Read Acts 1:8. Jesus promised that the apostles would be witnesses. Share a time in your life when your faith in Jesus mattered most. This can be the heart of your "witness" story.

I have a number of those kinds of stories... about fear, about sickness and death, about depression and suicide, about uncertainty about the future. How has your story and Jesus' story intersected? Be prepared for the opportunities for witnessing to others by thinking about your story in advance.

I'm sure the apostles were blown away by Jesus' promise. Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Now that is a Big Hairy Audacious Goal, a BHAG kind of promise! This is a promise that you and I couldn't hope to fulfill on our own.

Do you know the story of Mordecai Hamm? He was a little-known evangelist preaching in the backwoods of North Carolina. One day a young man attended one of his revivals. That young man came to faith in Christ, and for nearly a century proclaimed the gospel around the world. It would seem that God's promise to Mordecai Hamm was not fulfilled. He didn't preach to the ends of the earth. But his spiritual descendant Billy Graham did!

“You shall be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.” This is a promise that couldn’t be fulfilled in one generation. This is a promise that reaches all the way to you and to me! We are main characters in Act II of God’s story.

4. Now

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9-11).

Jesus is coming back. Doesn’t that give us a sense of urgency? Will we have tomorrow to witness to our family, our friends, our neighbors? Will we have tomorrow to reach people in Maya Costa, Mexico, in Malawi, Africa, or Hanoi, Vietnam?

Even now the gospel is being proclaimed in places we could never have imagined. But there are so many more to reach!

How does that connect with the second part of this message: Wait? It is no wonder that the early Church was constantly in prayer. They sensed this urgency. They needed the Holy Spirit’s presence and conviction. They needed the Spirit to guide them since they didn’t know God’s plan. They waited and they prayed with a sense of urgency.

Let’s spend a minute right now “waiting.” Not because we have all the time in the world, but because we do feel this urgency. Let’s quiet ourselves in prayer, asking God to make clear how and with whom we can carry out our commission: “You shall be my witnesses.”

We pray:

Lord Jesus, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us. Convince us anew through your word that you died for us and rose again. Guide us in the ways that we should go so that we experience and see the witness opportunities that you want us to seize. Give us wisdom how we are to dedicate our lives, our time, our abilities, our treasure, to this big hairy audacious goal... to be your witnesses to the ends of the earth. Amen.

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My Next Steps in God's Story as a Commissioned Witness

Convinced: Begin reading/listening to the Bible daily. Check out the YouVersion App. There are many Bible reading plans. You can listen while you drive. You can share your insights with friends.

Wait: Spend quiet time this week thinking of a period in your life when your faith in Jesus meant the most to you. What was happening? How did your faith sustain you? Write out "your story" as a lead into "God's Story."

Witness: Pray for an opportunity to be a witness to a family member or friend. Often the conversation can follow the "Your story, my story, God's story" outline. As someone shares their story with you, you can talk about how your story is similar in some way, and how God's story about Jesus helped you.

GroupWork for Small Groups or Personal/Family Study

1. **"I will be with you always" (Matthew 28:20).** Where have you seen Jesus active in your life this past week?
2. **Convinced:** Read Luke 24. Luke was writing to reassure Theophilus that Jesus' resurrection really happened. How would this chapter give Theophilus and/or you confidence that Jesus' resurrection really happened?
3. **Wait:** Share a time in your life when you didn't know what to do, so you waited and asked God to make it clear to you. How was your prayer answered?
4. **Witness:** Read Acts 1:8. Jesus promised that the apostles would be witnesses. Share a time in your life when your faith in Jesus mattered most. This can be the heart of your "witness" story.
5. **Now:** List the name of those with whom you feel called to share your story and Jesus' story. Read Acts 1:9-11. What gives you a sense of urgency in sharing your story/Jesus' story?
6. **Commissioned:** Read Acts 1:14. The early Christians prayed together. Break up into groups of 3 or 4 and commission each other to be witnesses. Let the group lay hands upon one individual at a time, praying for the Holy Spirit to come upon her/him and give her/him opportunities and the words to speak to witness to those listed in #5.