

### **Ephesians 1:17-23**

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

### **Acts 1:1-11**

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

### **“An Awkward Time”**

The movie *Million Dollar Baby* chronicles the life of a man who trains boxers, ending his career with the training of a female boxer. Boxing coach Frankie is a devout Catholic although his local Priest doesn't think so. He goes to mass every day, says his prayers and lives a life of integrity as far as the audience can see. But Frankie's Priest is tired of Frankie's constant theological questions. He refuses to believe that Frankie is trying to reconcile with his estranged daughter when Frankie honestly writes a letter a week to her. At one point the Priest says to Frankie, "I have no idea why you come here." It seemed pretty apparent to me why he came. Buried deep inside Frankie was a tiny bit of hope, which Frankie clung to. He hoped that God could forgive him for his failed relationships and that he could be reconciled to his daughter. Frankie had boxes and boxes of letters to attest to the depths of his faith. Frankie's Priest forgot the words of Augustine's classic statement on our expressions of faith and theology, "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity." Frankie's daily questions to his priest about the nonessentials of faith—were just that, nonessentials. He seemed to be looking for a word of hope, but rarely found one from his Priest.

Near the end of the movie Frankie's Priest told him that he could be lost to God forever. The Priest's actions toward Frankie reminded me how frequently we deny the mystery of our living Lord by doubting that the Holy Spirit is at work in the other person. It was the priest who lacked hope by refusing to trust that God was at work in Frankie.

He ceased to be a witness to the Easter faith, which was to give hope to all who believed. Jesus' ascension—was the kicking off point for the empowering of disciples to share the good news—the priest had unfortunately substituted the good news with the bad. This substitution is all too prevalent in the church universal today. I often wonder why in the world God risked empowering us to share the good news of Jesus, when we so easily turn good news bad?

The opening line from the classic *A Tale of Two Cities* fit the celebration and horror the disciples felt as Jesus departed from them. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” There the disciples stood gazing up at the sky, wondering how this news could be good. Jesus reigns, but Jesus was gone! What the early church would come to claim as a time of empowerment must have seemed anything but empowering to the eleven who watched Jesus depart. For them, this was a time of wonder tinged with fear. How would they fulfill the vast commission Jesus left them? How long would it be till he returned?

This was an awkward time! Instead of Jesus returning, those annoying men in white robes showed up to further complicate things. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” With Christ's ascension his disciples are to become an active part of God's salvation history!

Jesus left his disciples with a tall order. “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.” This message may sound tame to us since Christianity has spread around the globe. To the disciples the news was truly shocking. They were commanded to take good news out of the holy city and travel throughout Judea to share the gospel with pagans! They were to continue into Samaria—the ancient kissing cousins of Israel, rivals for land, and people Jews considered unclean. The ends of the earth meant eventually reaching that pagan, emperor-devoted city. Proclaiming the good news in Rome? Enemies, oppressors, pagans, soldiers, prostitutes—Jesus commanded the disciples to share the good news with all people regardless of their ethnicity, social habits or political affiliations.

Standing there on the Mount of Olives the disciples stood staring into the sky, knowing they were powerless to carry out Jesus' command on their own. They had no clue how to spread a witness of good news to their enemies! They barely believed the message themselves. How could they voice what they believed to others when it was beyond logical explanation?

Near the end of Luke's Gospel, the first part of the two books written by the author of Luke/Acts, two men in white robes met the women at the tomb proclaiming a shocking new message that Jesus is risen! The women went to tell the other disciples, and they scoffed at them. The apostles didn't believe the women's testimony! Those who knew Jesus most intimately laughed at what God revealed to the women. The Greek word used means that the disciples believed the women were talking rubbish, a bunch of bull, nonsense, trash. Who will believe this story, their testimony?

Where does the strength to live in this world but not be of it come from? There is a glimpse of it in the exaltation of the risen Christ and his promise that the Spirit is coming. He proclaims the day when there will be no more vacant gazing into the sky.

Latching onto this word of hope the eleven gathered with the women and other disciples in the upper room to devote themselves to prayer and unity.

They believed, so they waited. Times of waiting remind us that we cannot make it on our own. Waiting means we are not in control of our lives. The disciples knew they were powerless on their own to fulfill Jesus' commission. All this waiting and wondering helped the early church to claim the reality of being powerless without God's Spirit. They had to rest in God's care, trust in God's provision and support one another through that hard time.

The confession of Jesus' rule over our lives and the cosmos runs counter to the culture it originated in and every culture it has spread to since. Christians in America struggle to claim our belief that we are powerless without God. Our trouble, like the Priest's in Million Dollar Baby is that instead of knowing ourselves as powerless without God, we like to believe we dictate where the Spirit of God is or isn't at work. We act and react too quickly to one another because we neglect to wait upon the Spirit's wisdom. We place ourselves in a one up position over matters of faith when we know all fall short of reflecting God's glory. Our awkward time results from being filled with notions of power that have little to do with reliance upon God's call for justice, peace, care of creation and love for the stranger. We forget we are made powerful when vulnerable and weak. We forget that the Spirit is our power source, not our minds.

Yet we can witness to the great power of God at work in us as the Spirit unbinds us from this world. Martin Luther would cry out when he was afflicted with temptations and mental angst, "Satan, be gone! I am baptized." The Spirit's unbinding worldly powers! Luther knew he was baptized not only by water, but in the power of the Spirit. Hope placed in God breaks the bondage of worldly power over us.

Jesus' ascension marks a time between promise and fulfillment. The early Christian community's testimony gives us hope that what mystifies and bewilders us can be transformed into witness. To confess that Jesus "ascended into heaven" means that we believe he is still alive; that he pours out the Spirit upon us for ministry; and that he will return to restore all things. In the meantime, the Spirit dwelling within us enables us to share the riches of this joy as we wait.

Jesus left the disciples to ascend to God so he could be present with us forever. As we wait and trust in God's faithfulness the Spirit shows us how to trust one another. The impossible is made possible in Christ. We are never beyond God's reach and neither is anyone else. Live in hope and refuse to let go of our belief that God empowers each one of us with the Spirit. Amen.