

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

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Worship Series: Victorious

Service Theme: Ascension: Power from Heaven Marches Victorious to the Ends of the Earth

**Sermon Theme—Mission: International (May 29, 2022)
Acts 1:1-11**

“Your mission, should you choose to accept it...” Name that TV show. Yes, that’s the famous line repeated in every episode of the show **Mission: Impossible** from the 60s and 70s. Or the Tom Cruise *Mission: Impossible* films for the younger crowd.

The show followed the exploits of an elite team of secret agents, the IMF—the Impossible Missions Force, who were tasked with carrying out extremely difficult covert missions. Each episode, the IMF received their mission assignment with the line, *“Your mission, should you choose to accept it...”* And although the mission might have been deemed impossible for anyone else, the IMF agents always had the necessary skills and gadgetry to accomplish what seemed impossible.

This morning, as we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus, we’re reminded of the mission assignment Jesus has given to us. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to *“be [Jesus’] witnesses...to the ends of the earth.”* Call it, **Mission: International.**

But maybe taking the Gospel message of Jesus as the Savior of the world to the ends of the earth sounds like mission: impossible to you. Maybe you don’t feel like you have all the necessary skills or gadgetry to accomplish that mission. After all, the world we’re supposed to take the Gospel to is growing increasingly opposed to the message we’re supposed to proclaim. So, what chance do we have to accomplish a mission that seems downright impossible?

Especially when you consider the circumstances we’re celebrating today. At his Ascension, Jesus *“left [his disciples] and was taken up*

into heaven.” As if taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth wouldn’t have been difficult enough with Jesus at our side, now we’re supposed to do it when he’s not even around? But to know whether we should accept this mission, we have to weigh whether we’re well enough equipped to carry it out.

Our sermon text today is the beginning of the book of Acts, which is a companion to the Gospel of Luke, where today’s Gospel reading comes from. Both were written by Luke, a Gentile Christian doctor and missionary companion of the Apostle Paul. Dr. Luke wrote both Luke and Acts to a man named Theophilus. As Luke introduces Acts, *“In my former book, Theophilus (referring to Luke’s Gospel), I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up into heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.”*

Maybe you noticed, but Luke’s Gospel account ends, and the book of Acts begins with the same focus: the Ascension of Jesus. TV series today do that too, right? The last episode of Season 1 ends with an unexpected plot twist, or major event. Then, after waiting and waiting for the next season, or after just pressing “next” to continue your Netflix binge watching, Season 2 begins where Season 1 ended.

That tactic leaves us eagerly waiting for what happens next, but it also shows continuity and connectivity: that they’re part of the same story. So, by ending and beginning with Jesus’ Ascension, Luke binds these two books together as a continuation of the true story of God’s salvation history. Jesus’ Ascension is a fitting ending to Luke’s Gospel, which records what Jesus said and did for the salvation of the world while on earth. Jesus’ Ascension is a fitting beginning to Acts, which records what Jesus said and did for the salvation of the world...through his church.

These connected books give us insight on why we’re equipped for the mission Jesus gave us. As he told his disciples after his resurrection, *“Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.”*

Jesus taught them that everything they'd just seen, his suffering, death, and rising from the dead were all part of God's plan of salvation from the beginning, shown by the fact that God had been prophesying those things through his prophets for millennia!

But notice what else Jesus said had been prophesied from the beginning: ***“And repentance and the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.”*** This Mission: International wasn't some spur of the moment idea, or hastily devised scheme not fully thought through. This mission to use God's people to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth was God's mission from the beginning!

Would God make that his mission if he knew we would fail? Would God send us out to do this eternal, all-important work without equipping us with everything we need to fulfill it? Not at all! This is God's mission, and God's plan. So we can be confident that God is going to fully equip us so the mission can be accomplished!

As Jesus did for his disciples, he does for us. By God's grace and power, we are ***Equipped, Empowered, and Accompanied.*** Notice, Jesus told his disciples, ***“You will be my witnesses.”*** A witness doesn't have to convince the jury of the defendant's guilt or innocence. A witness simply shares with others what they saw, heard, or experienced. That meant Jesus' disciples didn't have to be highly trained orators, well-versed in all the tactics of rhetoric. Good thing, since many of Jesus' disciples were uneducated fishermen!

But Jesus equipped them with everything they needed to be his witnesses. As Luke tells Theophilus, ***“After [Jesus] suffering, he presented himself to [his disciples] and gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God.”***

During his earthly ministry, Jesus taught his disciples, and made them eyewitnesses of his love and power. And after his death, Jesus also taught them and made them eyewitnesses of his resurrection and victory of sin, death, and hell! Thus, equipping them to go out as

witnesses to the ends of the earth that Jesus had won salvation for the world!

Likewise, God has equipped us to be his witnesses! While we aren't eyewitnesses like the disciples, God has given us their eyewitness testimony in the Bible to share with others! And we too are called to simply witness to times you've personally experienced God's love, care, and providence in your life. To witness to the ways you've witnessed God's power change people's hearts—including your own! And God has equipped us with his Word, and Baptism and Holy Communion, through which he works to change people's hearts.

Jesus also empowered his disciples to be his worldwide witnesses, promising them, ***“In a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.”*** Just 10 days after his Ascension, on Pentecost, God powerfully poured out the Holy Spirit on his apostles as they began proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth right there in Jerusalem, which we'll talk about more next week as we celebrate Pentecost.

And God has empowered our witness in the same way! It isn't up to us to bring people to faith in Jesus. The Spirit does that work through the Word and Sacraments that God has equipped us to share! You don't have to eloquently say exactly the right things at the right time or else the mission will be ruined. No, we just have to witness, and the Spirit's power does the rest. As God promises, ***“My Word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”***

Jesus also promised to accompany his Apostles as they took the Gospel to the ends of the earth, promising them, ***“Surely I am with you always.”*** He's made that promise to you too! Jesus' Ascension wasn't him passing the baton to his church so that he could go to heaven and put his feet up! Jesus ascended into heaven so that his words and works that he began on earth could continue from his throne in heaven!

As today's prayer of the church, written by the 8th century English church father, the Venerable Bede on his death bed on Ascension Day reinforces that truth: ***“Lord Jesus, King of glory, on this day you ascended far above the heavens, and at God's right hand you rule the nations.”*** While on earth, Jesus set aside his full divine power and glory, confined to one place in a human body. But when Jesus ascended, he took back his full divine power and glory so that he can be everywhere at once, and can rule over and control all things in heaven and on earth for the good of the Church and his mission!

As we see Jesus as the conqueror riding on the white horse in Revelation, we're reminded whose power it is that accomplishes his mission through our witnessing! Jesus is the victorious conqueror over all those who oppose us, and his Gospel! Ascension reminds us that Jesus hasn't left us alone to do the work, but that as we witness for him, it's his power and presence that gives the mission success! Ascension doesn't just mark the beginning of the spread of the Gospel to all nations. Ascension is also the guarantee that that mission will end with success!

But we're still not always very gung-ho to carry out this mission, are we? We keep our mouths shut and miss opportunities out of fear, or apathy, or a lack of sense of responsibility that this is our personal mission. Even the Apostles, after all the ways they'd been equipped and empowered, still had to have their focus on the mission redirected twice in this text. They still thought Jesus would restore the kingdom of Israel. They still stood there staring up into the sky, until the angels reminded them that they had an all-important, urgent mission to get started on!

Don't we need the same? So often our focus is too narrow. We think we don't need to share the Gospel, because our church has a decent number of people in it; or because we ourselves believe, and we're only responsible for ourselves. Or we only share the Gospel with people like us, who fit within our social spheres, who we feel comfortable being around.

But friends, re-shift your focus! There's a vast mission field—the ends of the earth--that God has called us to reach! That means he calls us to go! To step outside of our comfort zones and personal bubbles so we can witness to all in need.

Or maybe we don't carry out the mission because our focus is on ourselves. We think we don't know enough of the Bible, or we aren't good enough speakers, or we're worried about how we and our relationships might be impacted by carrying out this mission.

Friends, re-shift your focus away from yourself! Don't focus on your own perceived deficiencies that make you think the mission is impossible for you. It's not about you! Instead, focus on the one who has promised to empower, equip, and accompany you as you simply witness to the Gospel!

In many ways, the ends of the earth are coming to us! In just the past few months, I've shared Bible teaching materials in French, Spanish, and Mandarin. That's why we're exploring the feasibility of starting a mission in St. John's County. That's why we're exploring the expansion of our preschool or school ministry! That's why we're looking to expand our ministry! Because there are billions of people that still need to hear the good news that Jesus is their Savior, and the ends of the earth start in our own backyard.

If you think your personal witness for Christ won't have an impact, consider this. Raise your hand if you're a Christian today because someone shared Jesus with you. All of us, right? Whether it was a parent, grandparent, pastor, teacher, friend, co-worker, or stranger, every single one of us are Christians, because someone carried out Jesus' mission to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

And so can we! So let's go! Far better than the IMF, you are equipped, empowered, and accompanied by everything—and especially everyone—for this Mission: International to be successful. Let's all carry out God's mission, until Jesus comes back in the same way he ascended, and rubber stamps his final approval-- **Mission: Accomplished.**

