

So I was probably 5 or 6 years old, and I still remember being in that church basement for Sunday school class. Just a handful. I still smell what that basement smells like.

My grandmother was a teacher. Just a handful of us. She was an old school teacher, and I think she was probably a pretty good one, and she was using cutting-edge methodology for that day to teach the lessons. We would sing a few songs, we'd pray a few prayers, and then teaching time, she would use a flannelgraph. Does anybody know what a flannelgraph is?

It's cutting-edge stuff. So a flannelgraph is just a board covered with flannel. And the, the cutout characters, Bible characters, have a little piece of cloth on them, and you could, you could then stick on there. And as she would tell the story, sometimes she would move the characters around. But there was one story in particular that I remember pretty vividly, and for this story, she really upped her game, and that's probably why I remember it.

And I'm pretty sure my grandpa helped with this. It was the story of the Ascension, Jesus ascending back into heaven after the resurrection, 40 days after the resurrection. And for this story, they had drilled a hole in the top of the flannelgraph board. And from the back, they had taken a string and they threaded it through the hole and brought it down the front and attached it to the Jesus character. And so as she was reading the story of the Ascension and Jesus being taken up into a cloud, she started pulling the string and Jesus gently scooted up the flannelgraph board and disappeared behind a cloud made out of cotton balls. I still, still remember it very, very vividly.

You know, I thought it was pretty amazing really that Jesus disappeared into the cloud.

But what I understand now that I didn't understand then was this was just the beginning of something very amazing and powerful, something that includes you and includes me. So Jesus goes up, and then the Spirit comes down, and then the church goes out. So over the last few weeks, we've been exploring what Jesus meant when he said, I will build my church. And so we've talked about the church, we defined what the church is and how Jesus brings us together with different gifts and talents to be a part of his body now. And, and we use those gifts and talents not to point to ourselves, but to, to enhance the body for the greater good of the kingdom and the church.

And, and as Tim talked last week, it's all governed and guided by love. This morning, we need to understand something.

This may sound harsh.

It's not about us. The church is not about us. It is in some ways, but

there's something greater. The church isn't simply for you or me. Jesus builds His church so that we together with him will go out into the world with his message of love and continue his mission.

So we, we go out because you know this, beyond these walls and probably in the room today, beyond these walls for sure, there is a world that desperately needs peace. They desperately need some joy. They desperately need confidence. In the future. And Jesus intends for us to go out and tell that message that those things are found in a relationship with him.

You know, a lot of Christians are saved, and I think they're still maybe confused as to what, what am I supposed to do with this?

Let me ask you a question.

What if you and your availability this week are the answer to somebody's prayer? Somebody's praying. What if you're the answer to their prayer? Luke tells the story of the Ascension 2 times. He tells it at the end of his Gospel.

Of course, Dr. Luke, physician, writes Luke, and then he writes the book of Acts. It's a 2-parter. And so at the end of Luke in chapter 24, he tells of the Ascension, and then he tells it again at the beginning of the book of Acts. And there he tells us that Jesus, before he ascends into heaven, spends 40 days with his disciples. And we get a few glimpses of those 40 days after the resurrection, but not much.

We just get a little insight, but not a whole lot. Luke says that during those 40 days Jesus is teaching them. He's teaching them about the kingdom of God. Think about these guys. They've been through a lot.

They witnessed the death of Jesus, and when Jesus dies, all of their dreams, all their hopes, all the things they imagined died with him on that Friday afternoon. But then on Sunday morning, as rumblings of the resurrection flow through the community, they are filled with confusion and maybe the thrill of hope. And then they realize it—Jesus is alive. And he spends 40 days with them teaching them about the kingdom of God. Now, don't you think they should have everything figured out by this time?

They're a lot like us. Listen to Acts chapter 1, verses 6 through 11.

So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?

He replied, The Father alone has authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. But you will receive power

when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere— in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. As they strained to see him rising into heaven, 2 white-robed men suddenly stood among them. Men of Galilee, they said, Why are you standing here staring into heaven?

Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go. So these guys had a front row seat to Jesus. They had experienced him for 3 years, and then they had 40 bonus days to, to understand what Jesus was talking about. After his resurrection, and yet they're still asking the same question. Lord, when are you going to make Israel great again?

When are you going to restore us back to the days of King David? Like, you know, when's that going to happen?

Even after they had seen everything and heard everything, they're still thinking politically. They were still thinking about Israel's future. They're thinking about Roman oppression, Roman power, They're thinking about when can we get back to the way it was when David was king. Jesus is not thinking about any of that stuff. That's not what he's thinking about.

Jesus is thinking much bigger, much higher. They're thinking about restoration of Israel. Jesus is thinking about the world. He's thinking about the kingdom of God. He's thinking about a mission that would reach far beyond Israel to the ends of the earth.

Jesus doesn't answer their question with a clear timetable. I, I think he probably sighed. He doesn't answer that with a clear timetable. Rather, he redirects their attention. They want to know when.

Jesus tells them what. They want a timetable. Jesus gives them a task. It's like Jesus is saying, hey, listen, Would you guys stop worrying about that kind of stuff? There are more important things for you to think about.

Wait, just go to Jerusalem and wait until you're clothed with power from on high. You are going to receive power from the Holy Spirit in a few days, and, and then you will see your mission more clearly. You will be my witnesses from here to the ends of the earth. They want information. Jesus gives them a mission.

I understand those guys because we're a lot like— I was once called an information freak in front of a lot of people. It's like, well, hey, I do need to know some things. We want to know stuff. We want to know what's coming next. We want to know how everything will work out.

Jesus answers the information freaks in Acts 1 by essentially saying, there are some things that you don't need to know, and there are some things you won't know, and there's something you need to know right now, and that is you have something to do. I have something I need you to do. What is it? I need you to be My witnesses. Jesus goes up, the Spirit comes down, and the church goes out as witnesses.

Jesus doesn't call his people to be salespeople. He doesn't call them to be influencers. He doesn't call them to be image managers. He calls them to be witnesses. Well, what is a witness?

A witness simply tells the truth. About what they've seen and what they've experienced. So we tell others who Jesus is, what he's done for us, what he means to us. Now here's, here's a little bit of a sobering thought. The word for witness in Greek is *martus*, and that's the root of our word martyr.

And so what happens is our word martyr evolves because many early Christians end up dying because of their witnessing, because of sharing their testimony. And Jesus actually says in Revelation 2:10, I want you to be faithful in your storytelling and witnessing even to the point of death, and then you will receive the crown of life. Being a witness is, is a responsibility far beyond our abilities, and that's why Jesus promises us power beyond ourselves. We're empowered by the Spirit of God. The church goes out not on its own strength But we go out because the Spirit comes down so we can go out.

The mission belongs to Jesus, the power comes from the Spirit, the privilege of participating is given to us. So after the ascension, they return to Jerusalem, they gather in prayer, probably confusing time, What are we supposed to do? Just stay there and pray, wait and pray. And then on the day of Pentecost, 9 days after Jesus ascends, 9 days, on the day of Pentecost on a Sunday morning, the Spirit comes down, the church is born, and the mission begins. Jesus goes up, Spirit comes down, church goes out.

And notice something about the ascension.

It says Jesus goes up into a cloud, into a cloud. I want to talk a whole bunch about this, but I'll restrain myself. Throughout scripture, clouds— cloud— a cloud is very important because it is associated with the glory and the presence of God. And later Jewish tradition had a term for this called the *Shekinah*. The *Shekinah* of God, describing his glory, describing his presence.

So when Jesus ascends into a cloud, this is not just some cotton ball cloud, it's not some cumulus cloud. He is ascending into the glory and the presence of God. He's ascending to begin his reign.

Luke begins Acts by referring to his first work, the Gospel of Luke,

and he says that was what Jesus began to do and teach. Notice the word began.

Jesus wasn't finished when he ascended to heaven. And so in the gospel, he worked through his physical body to do the things that he does. But now, after beginning that, he has passed that mission on to his body, the body of Christ, which is the church. He's passed it on to us to continue his work, and we are empowered by the Spirit of God to do it. So we're reminded— I love this picture Nate Flynn took.

I don't know if it's just kind of God, but it sure seems like it to me. It's just a reminder, hey, I'm with you. I'm with you in what you do. I love you. I care for you.

You're empowered by my Spirit. I've not stopped working. I've not stopped caring about you and all the people around you. So after, after Jesus ascends, the disciples are standing there staring into the sky, and it's kind of like the angel said, don't, don't just stand there, do something. I don't think that's really what they're saying, but it seems like it.

I don't think it's a rebuke, but it's a reminder. They're looking up And Jesus is wanting them to look out. He gave them a mission, and he's given us one as well. The angels remind them that Jesus will come back with clouds. Talks about that in Revelation and other places.

And that's our hope, that's our confident expectation. Jesus ascended, Jesus reigns, and Jesus will come again. Between his ascension and a second coming, we have been given work to do. We are his witnesses. That brings us to one of the core values at Sherwood Oaks.

I think the posters are still on the wall. One of them says, we think like everyday missionaries. And that just reminds us that you don't go to China, you don't go to India to be a missionary. That's fine for Some. We're glad we do that.

But you don't have to go overseas. Mission work happens in everyday life. It's right in front of us. It's where we are. It's at work.

It's at school. It's in our neighborhoods. It's at dinner tables. It's at the ball field. It'll be present in front of you Friday night at Tent Retreat.

Come and do something officially. Just come and walk around and greet people. But it's a great opportunity. Jesus told his followers to make disciples of all nations in Matthew 28, and the language there in the original language, it's not like, oh, you have activities over here. Here's your life and you have this activity over here to make disciples.

No, that's not what he says. He's saying as you live your life, as you go on your life, as you do things, make disciples. So it's just, it's a part of who we are. It's the lifestyle that we live. We gather to worship here and then we scatter.

We scatter to witness and the mission field is wherever you are. It's amazing how God works. A few years ago before I came to Sherwood Oaks, I was wandering in a wilderness of confusion. I've talked about this before. Just waiting for what was next.

While I was waiting, I took a very part-time job that I didn't even know existed until somebody told me. It's called marketplace chaplain. Did you know marketplace chaplains exist?

Large corporations see the value in a holistic approach to their employees, so a lot of them now hire marketplace chaplains where this person— it was me— would just go around this huge warehouse in Bloomington, and you're not allowed to proselytize or anything, but you just you're just there. They know you're a marketplace chaplain, and you just talk to people and ask them how they're doing. If somebody wants to be prayed for, you can pray for them. So I, once a week, I would go into this large warehouse and walk around. And it's clear some people knowing my role would run away.

They didn't want anything to do with me, which made me feel bad.

Other people would talk about this stuff. Tasha was in that warehouse. I met Tasha there. Um, but there was one guy in particular that I, I really— he was so friendly. I just found him easy to talk to.

So I would go talk to him, and he would not engage spiritually. I tried a couple times, but he made it clear he didn't want to do that. But we'd just talk. And so I'd always seek him out and find him and talk to him. Well, I left that job when I started at Sherwood Oaks.

There was a little bit of overlap, and I invited him to church one day, and he just kind of said, well, yeah, maybe sometime. So I just left that job, and, and a couple years after I quit Marketplace Chaplains, a couple years after I'd been at Sherwood Oaks Bloomington, this guy shows up on a Sunday morning.

And when I saw him, I recognized him, but he looked so broken.

I, I was kind of stunned, and it wasn't very far in the conversation, just tears just started flowing. So Long story short, I started getting with him, and, um, he was in a world of extreme pain, in a major, major mess. And he remembered me, and he sought me out as an act of desperation, I guess. So as we continue to get together, I baptized him a little bit later, and now He is using his mess as his message, and he is reaching people I could never reach. I'm confident

of that.

He is a bright spot in my life. He's a bright spot in our regeneration group that meets on Tuesday nights. And I guess the point of that is don't ever underestimate what God can do through you, even when you have no clue. I didn't feel like I was doing anything with Marketplace Chaplains. It just felt kind of like useless activity, but don't underestimate what God can do through you even when you're not aware of it.

People all around us are hurting. They need Jesus— neighbors, workers, fellow students, friends, family members. The challenge is not having opportunities to make a difference. The challenge is not recognizing them. The challenge is being aware and being intentional once we are aware.

If we're unaware and unintentional, then we're probably missing the opportunity to share the hope we have in Jesus. Every morning this week, I want you to begin your day with one simple prayer. It is, Lord, help me see the people you place in my path today as and help me be available. It's a simple prayer. Available to listen, available to encourage, available to serve, available to help, and when the opportunity comes, available to talk about Jesus.

Share meals together, share burdens, listen, encourage, and, and these things don't really replace the gospel at all, but they help people see what the gospel looks like. And this is how Jesus continues building his church. Go out, be a witness. The apostles, their witness is a little bit different because it was like eyewitness. They were testifying to what they had seen and what they had heard in the life, the death, and burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

We, we don't have that, but we have their testimony in scripture, and we have our own experience with Christ that we can share with others. So we bear witness, and sometimes that means sharing our story, sometimes it means explaining why we're hopeful about things, sometimes it means inviting someone to, to take their next step with Jesus. You know, I think back to that little Sunday school classroom. I can still see my grandma pulling Jesus up, up that board. And him disappearing behind the cotton ball cloud.

Jesus went up, the Spirit came down, and the church went out. For nearly 2,000 years, Jesus has been building his church through ordinary people like you and like me who have received an extraordinary— or extraordinary power, his Spirit. One day Jesus will return, but until that day we are called to be witnesses. We have a mission. We are his witnesses and we can start right where we are with the people God has placed in our lives.

You say, well, what is the message that we share? Well, the very

essence of it is it's the good news that we sang at the beginning. What you were trying to remember is I said this is our theme song for regeneration because it's God so loved. So you can bring your failures, you can bring your addictions, you can bring whatever, and that's the message. Jesus died for us.

He had to die for our sins. He was glad to die for our sins because he loves us. He rose from the dead. He offers forgiveness. He offers hope.

He offers peace, joy, and confidence. He offers a new life to everyone who trusts him. That's our message. That's our hope. And that's what we think about as we prepare to take communion here in just a moment.

The bread reminds us of the body of Jesus. It reminds us that he lived in a physical body. And he began a mission. And in some ways that mission ended when he died on the cross, but in other ways it just began. But the blood that he shed— life is in the blood— he gave his life for our life, and then he rose from the dead.

And so we're reminded of all that as we take the bread and we drink the cup. So before we go out to share his love, we pause to remember how much he loves us. So let's take the communion this morning. Let's remember— let's receive the communion this morning. Let's remember what he has done, and let's also think about the people all around us that need to experience what we're experiencing in Christ.

So let me pray. Father, thank you for revealing to us so much about your love, and thank you for sending Jesus. We know he had to die because of our rebellious nature, but it's kind of stunning to think that he was glad to do so because he loves us so much. Give us insight into other people and where they are. Help us to see them as you see them.

Empower us with your Spirit to love them as you love them and to share. So as we take this bread and we drink this cup, we're reminded that we proclaim the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus until he comes. And as we wait, we continue to witness. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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