

Introduction:

- A. You've heard actors and musicians talk about a backstage green room. It's where they wait to go on stage. There's food and couches and a monitor to show them what's happening out in front of the audience. But it is just a place to wait. Must be kind of a nerve-wracking place. Jesus' disciples were in a kind of green room on what I think of as the very first Sunday night—the end of the very first Lord's Day, the evening of the day Jesus rose from the dead. You remember their consternation and confusion. Then, suddenly, Jesus appeared. He made sure they grasped that he was no ghost. **Then he reoriented them.**

You know how we say someone who has been through a trauma is half-dead? Well, these disciples were sort of half-alive. Jesus had died and risen again. They believed in him completely. Their sins were forgiven. They were going to heaven. But in a way, they were like the lifeless clay Adam at creation, or like the dry bones Ezekiel saw, but after they were all en fleshed and waiting to catch their breath. The disciples were rarin' to go—to tell what they had seen and been taught. Yet even with their testimony clear, they *weren't* ready. They *weren't* sent. What were they waiting for?

- B. Think of a group of Christians gathered in someone's living room talking and praying about starting a church. How do they get oriented? Or a group of Elders wondering if the church they lead is positioned for growth. Or some friends deciding on which church they should attend. What should they look for? What's essential
- C. Before the very first church was birthed, Jesus made sure his disciples were clear about three essentials. Luke retells the story at the beginning of his second book: the Acts of the Apostles: **1:1-11**... Did you see the three essentials for a church?

I. WE STUDY THE SCRIPTURES TO UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT OUR LIFE TOGETHER IN CHRIST

A. Did you notice how significant the Old Testament Scriptures are in both of the passages Luke recorded?

These men are the eyewitness of Jesus. They had seen him crucified and now they saw him alive again. What's more, they had heard everything he had said and seen everything he had done. Wouldn't you think that the main order of business for the early church would be to review all that? (*"OK men, let's go over the beatitudes again."* *"And who can tell me the story of the sower and seed?"* *"Where was the Gadarene demonic from?")* But instead from his very first moments with his disciples after the resurrection Jesus is taking them to the Old Testament scriptures. Why?

Illus.: I remember a few years ago preaching through Matthew's account of Jesus' last days—like the Last Supper, his agonized prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest, trial, all the details of his crucifixion—the cruelty, the mocking, the sign over his head, the three-hour darkness, Jesus' cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", the torn curtain in the temple, the earthquake and resurrected saints, and the centurion exclaiming, *"Surely he was the Son of God!"* Do you know what was hard about preaching that? Matthew says very little about what it all *means*? To understand what it all *means* Jesus took his disciples back to the Old Testament and now we also look the New Testament letters.

B. The OT doesn't just *point* to Christ; it *explains* what we now see. Read carefully the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and you see things about Jesus' death that you might have missed in Matthew or John. Study Leviticus with Pastor Mike and it is as though you are seeing and touching the spiritual scaffolding of Jesus' sacrifice. Read

the life of David and see the future of a better shepherd, hero, and king. Read Psalm 22 and you are in the solemn, faith wrestling of Jesus on the cross. Study Is 53 and you will understand the substitutionary atonement. Then read the New Testament and see how each of the gospel writers preach in the artful arrangement of their stories of Jesus, or the profound temple of gospel truth in Romans. The monument in Hebrews to the Christ worthy of our perseverance, or the astonishing images of Christ and his church, and the world to come in Revelation.

- C. In an effective and powerful church God's people study their Bibles in order to understand the treasures and life of our faith in Christ. We are not simply intrigued academics, gathering our Bible facts. We are people finding ourselves, our Savior, and purpose, and our hope on *every page* of this precious book! We do not just preach the "good parts" or the easy things. We don't just look for the practical sections. We believe what Paul wrote in **2 Tim 3**: *"...the Holy Scriptures, are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

II. WE WITNESS FOR CHRIST IN EVER-WIDENING CIRCLES BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THE HOLY SPIRIT EMPOWERS US (1:4-8)

Does this talk of power make you feel a little edgy? Because, of course, we don't often *feel* powerful. We don't feel like we're spiritually muscle-bound and we usually don't feel a rush of spiritual adrenaline. In fact, a lot of the time, we don't *feel* anything. Check that: we actually *feel* weak. That's the thing about the Spirit's power—there's no guarantee you'll *feel* it. In **2 Cor. 12** Paul tells of feeling embarrassingly helpless because of some debilitating thorn in the flesh. He writes, *"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from*

me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." So when he did that—boasted in his weakness—did he get a jolt of power, like when Popeye ate spinach? Maybe sometimes he felt that, but mostly we don't. It is a strange thing to have such great power and not actually feel it. But that's how it is.

A church can be just like that too. I hope that when you gather with one another you often sense the *presence* of God, but I'd be surprised if you often feel the *power* of God. It usually feels pretty ordinary around here. But things are not always what they seem! Because we *have* received the Holy Spirit, rest assured of these three things:

A. Whether we feel powerful or not, we believe that the Holy Spirit has immersed us into the life of Christ – vv.4-5...

People had been baptized by John the Baptist because they had repented of their sin and we're ready for God's cleansing. John's baptism was kind of like a Saturday night bath preparing people for the day of the Lord's grace. When we are born again we are born of water—spiritual baptism—and of the Spirit. We come up out of the bath of God's grace in Christ gasping for new air—the Breath of God. Next Sunday we'll look at the story of the day when God plunged his church into the life of the Holy Spirit. The Breath of God whooshed into their lives like wind. Fire danced above them as though they were ignited. And their words of witness were so urgent that they came out in the mother tongue of everyone listening. *Wow! Wouldn't you like to be part of that!?* But we are! We do breathe the life of God because God's Spirit is in us more truly than oxygen filling our lungs. We are aflame with the holiness of God. We are amazingly able to put the gospel in just the words—the mother tongue—that people in our path can

understand. **The Spirit has immersed us into the life of Christ.**

- B. Now look again at **v.8...** Whether we feel powerful or not, we believe that the Holy Spirit has empowered us to witness for Christ anywhere. Jesus intended his disciples to be his witnesses in ever-widening circles and the key to our effectiveness is the *power of the Holy Spirit*. Maybe you've heard that the Greek word here for *power* is *dunamis*, like *dynamite*. But even on our best days as a church I don't seem to be seeing dynamite happen. But then you remember that it was the power of the Holy Spirit that came upon Mary. Not much like dynamite. In Acts we'll see the power of the Spirit take many forms, some of them explosive, to be sure. But the Spirit's power is working when Stephen faces a martyr's death with hope and when Phillip appears at just the right time to tell an Ethiopian man about Christ. Power is working when the church hammers out hard problems and when they send out missionaries. The power of the Spirit is working when Paul and Silas sing in their chains as surely as when God springs them free with an earthquake.

Most of the time, the power of the Holy Spirit works in the church through the way we love each other, the way we endure in our faith when the pressure is on, the way we 'happen' to have a significant, unexpected conversation about Jesus, the way we step into the mess of someone's life with the love of Jesus. **And that power, which looks far more like hydraulics than dynamite, is what will make our witness at VCL powerful.** All the power comes from the Spirit. We are expected only to be holy and prayerful.

- C. Did you notice the mentions of the kingdom of God? **V.3** says that in the 40 days after his resurrection Jesus "*spoke about the kingdom of God.*" And **v.6** says the disciples "*gathered around him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this*

time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" In short, the answer was yes and no. *Yes I am*, Jesus might have said, *and you'll be my body to do that. You'll be my hands and feet. You'll touch and go and preach. Me through you.* Those first believers were about to learn that Jesus was going to use *them*, of all people, to restore the kingdom, and that Israel was going to become a world-wide kingdom made up of every people and language. The third thing we need to believe is that the Holy Spirit, working through us, builds God's everlasting kingdom here and now. We *are* waiting for God's kingdom, but we are also smack-dab in the life of it now. We *are* that great army of redeemed, God-freed people. We *are* that former bone yard who are now a vast nation of up-from-the-grave, God-breathing saints.

There is one more essential for our orientation: **vv.9-11....**

III. WE ALWAYS JOYFULLY ANTICIPATE JESUS' RETURN

- A. Do you remember how the last verses of Luke described the reaction of Jesus' disciples: **Lk 24:50-52...** Wouldn't you think they'd be *a little* sad? Why were they rejoicing? Because Jesus was alive. Because he reigned. Because he most certainly was building his kingdom. Because they were safe forever in his love. Because Jesus Christ the Lord had *blessed* them.
- B. A church that thinks about Jesus' second coming has infectious gospel hope. We are people who know the world will *not* end with a whimper. We are people who know that *evil* will not win in the end. We are people who have a better homeland by far, who are not afraid of dying, and who live like there's a great Tomorrow. We are happy pilgrims, we are a Bride counting down the days. We are the world's homesick people, rounding the last bend. Homesick Christians make the most difference in the world. Homesick Christians are magnetic; they draw

people in toward Jesus, as though endowed with the power of gravity.

Conclusion

So what are we here for? Why are you in this church—in this congregation? **We're here to be powerful witnesses for Christ to the world so that God's kingdom might grow.** Whatever else we do around here, Jesus has given us the three essentials:

1. Study the Scriptures to grow deep and wise in God's grace and truth.
2. Rely on the power of the Holy Spirit, no matter what we feel.
3. Be joyful in our hope in Jesus' return.